Three Gentlemen from New Caledonia

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BOOK I

CHAPTER I

AT THE "RIVER OF PASSING SOULS"

NOT far from Muèo Bay, on the west coast of New Caledonia, a small river, too insignificant to own a name on the map, having forsaken its swift descent through many a sombre ravine, winds its way seawards through a bottle-shaped strip of inky mud swamp.

At its mouth, the stream is cleft very curiously by a tall pinnacle of ironstone, a gaunt and lonely sentinel, which has there stood guard through countless centuries. An excellent "mark," when used in conjunction with the cone-like peak of Mount Kopeto rising far inland, for the guidance of a mariner seeking the channel entrance.

But its possible utility is wasted. No one seeks to enter the little river, for the sea thereabouts is too shallow for the navigation of any but very small craft; and, three miles out, a never-ending reef of coral would seem effectually to bar a direct approach.

From inland, access to the mouth of the river is well-nigh impossible. The lofty walls of the ravines rise sheer, and, though widening out somewhat, they continue on both sides of the swamp and converge again at the foreshore.

By day, even the natives of New Caledonia can hardly be persuaded to approach the vicinity; by night never, for the place is taboo. The spirits of their dead (so the natives aver) troop down the little river on their way to their final resting-place, that vast Somewhere deep in the mysterious ocean.

Did not life come out of the womb of the ocean? says the old superstition; then shall not it surely return to the place of its birth?

The natives of New Caledonia answer in the affirmative. For them the Valley of the Shadow is no poetic fancy; it is present in form and substance—a little river. They call it the "River of Passing Souls."

Towards the end of the nineteenth century (what time our story opens), on a certain night in

March, a native, armed with club and throwing-spear, came flitting through the scrub in the direction of the little river.

The savage charms, hideous relics, with which he was adorned, proclaimed him a "wizard," over whom the evil spirits known to haunt the place could wield no power. Nevertheless, the wizard was uneasy, as his frequent backward glances plainly showed.

Now he would lurk behind the bleached bole of some giant eucalyptus tree; then, when, for a while, the billowy monsoon clouds flung a veil across the face of the brazen moon, he would dart eerily across the open spaces, emulating, as it were, the great bats whirling and twisting overhead.

Having reached the out-cropping rocks on the heights above the little river, the wizard leaped lightly from point to point, and presently he gained the edge of the last narrow ravine. There, while the moon sank lower and lower towards her cave in the illimitable ocean, he crouched motionless in the shadow of a gully, and, leaning over, peered down into the chasm.

Suddenly the watcher sprang upright and poised aloft his throwing-spear. Far beneath him, apparently wading down the bed of the river, three "spirits" were emerging from the gloom of the

ravine, their naked shoulders glistening above the level of the swart and sullen water.

Zip!

The spear flashed into the river scarce two feet in front of its mark. A faint, derisive cry arose from the depths. With an answering yell of rage the wizard swung high his club, then flung it with lightning rapidity downwards. He craned forward to mark its progress, and it seemed to him that the head of one of the "spirits" fell forward; then the sky became dark.

When next the lantern of the night flung forth her rays, the wizard was far away, and the water-walkers were almost abreast of the solitary rock-sentinel at the river's mouth. Here, instead of passing to their final resting-place in the orthodox manner, the three "spirits" turned towards the indigo shadows under the south bank of the river. Now, quite close together, only their heads were visible, while beyond them a stout limb of Kauri pine bobbed up to the surface and floated slowly through the gap towards the "tumble" on the tiny bar outside.

The tide was low, leaving bare a wedge of slippery rocks. With many a stumble the "spirits" gained a short stretch of dry sand lying beyond; a small curved bay, as it were, on the seashore at the

base of the cliff; and it might have been seen that one of them was being carried by the others, who appeared all but exhausted themselves.

Staggering, but as if their route were well known to them, they at length reached a narrow ledge sloping obliquely up the face of the cliff.

As the twain ascended with their burden the rough track deepened, and finally ended abruptly at a small egg-shaped orifice which led into a spacious cave. A few moments later the "spirits" had disappeared from sight.

At the far end of the cave, upon a bank of fine, velvety sand, lay three men. To one of them sleep had refused its welcome solace. Prone upon his back, he stared upwards into the iron-lidded darkness, listening enviously to the deep breathing of his two companions.

Every now and again, the sleeper farthest away from him would break out into a rasping cry or a smothered oath that culminated in a snarl as of some wild beast. Then—silence; and, without, the restless sea-sounds would grow deeper like the soft diapason of a cathedral organ.

Several times during the tedious hours the sleepless man had left the cave and crouched on the ledge outside. There, heedless of the extreme

beauty of the tropical night, the enticing murmur of lazily breaking wavelets, the million flashing and sparkling eyes of a phosphorescent ocean, he had anathematised the tardiness of dawn, had ached for generous sunlight to warm him, but more especially for light that would quench the long wavering glimmer of milky fire marking the smother on the reef three miles away.

Would day never break, and reveal clearly what lay on the horizon far beyond? Incessantly the same question, the same fruitless longing, until the man's eyes burned with their futile straining, and the cool monsoon chilling his naked body drove him back again to the warmer region of the cave.

For the sixth time he crawled in through the narrow cave-mouth and stretched himself on the dry sand; then, finding sleep still impossible, he leaned over and gently roused the man next to him.

"Kit!" he whispered. "Kit—. Quiet, man," —for the startled sleeper had seized him roughly by the arm,— "it is I?"

"Huh! I thought— you, André?— Curse that little screaming animal!" He made a motion as if to strike the noisy dreamer at his side; but his companion, divining his intention, stopped the blow, saying quickly:

"Leave him alone. The more sleep he gets the better it will be for him—and for us."

"Better for us if we'd let him wash out to sea—and hell," growled the other. "He was mad enough before; and that crack on the head won't make him any saner."

"Bah! It was only a glancing blow—the handle of a club, I fancy; a parting present from our terpsichorean friend with the thigh bones round his middle." André spoke with a remarkably refined, cultured accent, in great contrast to his companion's uncouth tones. "A case of *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*, eh, Kit?" he added quizzingly. "Unless you have forgotten your classical 'tags.'"

"Blast him for a bad shot, anyway," grumbled Kit.

"None of that!" André took him up sharply. "You seem to forget we three are bound together by a compact; and I am superstitious enough to believe that my last chance of luck would vanish if we broke faith."

"Who's talking about breaking faith? You know as well as I do, we could have escaped twice if Jean hadn't bungled, curse him."

"He has suffered for it."

"So have I,"—bitterly,—"though you always managed to save your skin."

"Sneers, Kit? Why? How would it have been if I had lost what sham liberty I had gained by my good conduct? Should we be here now, if I had been sent back to the nickel mines, as you were, or to the hulks, as Jean, there, was? I know both, and what you have endured." Then, after a short silence: "Have the years we have been apart destroyed your trust in me?"

"No. If I mistrusted you, I'd have got at you somehow—you know it—same as I mean to get at Courtois, if ever we get clear of this damned island."

"We shall do so."

"No trust in you?" the other went on. "Jean and I have got to have trust—blind dog's trust—and don't you know it! For a week we've followed you. And you know what sort of a holy seven days it's been, and what have you told us? Nothing!"

"After the two previous disasters I preferred to keep my own counsel. I told you I would bring you to a place where a vessel would be waiting to take us off. Is that nothing—after nearly twenty years in this hell-hole?"

"Place!" Kit took him up. His nerves seemed all on edge. "Place! A grave, more like!"

"There is just such a possibility," returned André, in level tones.

"How do you know this is the place?"

"I am certain of it."

"You're mighty cocksure"—insolently.

André made no reply, and his silence and studied self-control, which no hardships, dangers, or pangs of hunger ever seemed capable of breaking down, roused his companion to exasperation.

"Rot your high and mightiness," he began. "Can't you climb down off your pedestal for a bit and give us some explanation of it all? Can't——"

He stopped abruptly. André had touched him on the shoulder.

"Not so loud," he said calmly. "You forget. I never give explanations. And when we resume our former relationship I shall never 'explain' anything—ever."

There was a long pause, fraught with the silent antagonism of two wills. The weaker man broke the silence, and when he spoke, a curious inflection in his voice seemed to carry with it not only absolute submission to his listener, but a seeming reluctant, rough affection even.

"The same Andy," growled Kit, with an oath. "The same 'Mister Masterful.' Cursed if I know why we ever put up with it. You're not like the rest of us. All right. I give in."

"I accept the conditions," said André, evincing but little enthusiasm or satisfaction.

"Andy?"

"Yes?"

"S'posin' the vessel doesn't——"

"The vessel will be here at dawn."

"But—supposin'?" Kit insisted.

"Patience."

"It won't fill our stomachs."

"There are lizards," said André. "For the present our only danger is the biped devils who have once or twice nearly killed and eaten us in the last few days. Our dear friend the Governor of this accursed hole already deems us dead and eaten, and I've no doubt, after the special care he has always bestowed on us, he is glad to be relieved of our responsibility. For the rest, if the schooner fails us I shall think my luck has deserted me for ever, and then——"

"Like that, is it?" muttered Kit gloomily. "Well, you're not the only one. I don't know what's kept me from stretchin' myself all these years."

"You don't know!" replied André scornfully. "Don't you? Well, Jean does. Listen to him. He's been dreaming he's got Courtois by the throat all night."

Kit muttered an inaudible curse, and for a while the two men lay quiet, listening to the horrible sounds uttered by their sleeping comrade.

"Say, Andy," Kit said doubtfully, "what's it going to be if we get clear? The same old business?"

"What else is open to us?" retorted André. "Honesty? Bah! What do we owe the world? It is in our debt—a million times more so now—and we will exact every sou, my friend. Every sou!"

"We'll be a bit out of date," suggested Kit. André laughed softly.

"Give me a month," he said, "in Paris, Rotterdam, Vienna, London—any of the old haunts—and I'll know all there is to know. And if the Little Dutchman is still alive and in business, it will be all the easier——"

"Who?"

"Van Langenberg."

"Huh! You'll never find him again."

André let the remark pass without comment.

"How about living, meanwhile?" growled Kit.

"Work! Yes, honest work—if you can get it. You've learnt how to work in this— Dawn!" he cried, breaking off. "Dawn at last!"

The pitch blackness had become indigo, and at

the far end of the cave the outline of the buttress of rock veiling the opening was barely perceptible. With one accord both men scrambled hurriedly on hands and knees across the cave, and squeezed past the buttress to the ledge outside. The sun had risen with tropical suddenness, flooding land and sea with an ineffable radiance.

Cursing their eyes for blinking in the unaccustomed light, they gazed westward—out over the now grey-green waters at their feet, where the high cliffs yet cast their chill, hard, morning shadows—out, where the first rays of a new-born sun danced joyous and sparkling, tinging with rainbow hues the interminable film of spray-flung mist suspended over the reef and completely veiling the horizon beyond.

"We are in hell!" suddenly whispered Kit, in a hoarse voice. His face was livid, and he was shaking as with an ague. Another moment and his nerves, strained to breaking point by his recent privations, and now by the tension of hope unfulfilled, would go all to pieces.

"The vessel is there," muttered André, pointing seawards. "We cannot see her, but she is there."

"Mother of Jesus, we are in hell!" cried Kit again. He began to laugh weirdly. Flinging his

long arms upwards, he sprang towards the lip of the ledge.

Like lightning André swung round, gripped him, and, with amazing strength, dashed him back into the cave-mouth.

"Fool!" he cried.

"Let's swim away," raved the demented man. Suddenly he thrust André aside, and dashed headlong down the narrow ledge.

André raced after him, overtook him on the sand almost at the water's edge, and tripped him up; and as the crazy man attempted to regain his feet André struck him a tremendous blow on the point of the jaw. Kit quivered for a second, then collapsed, insensible.

André stood over the fallen man, eyeing him grimly; then, hearing a shout behind him, he wheeled round towards the cliff.

The third occupant of the cave, aroused by the cry of "Dawn," had emerged on the ledge. For a moment or two he had stared, blinking seawards, then he caught sight of the others, at the very instant that André struck Kit down.

With a shout he tore down the ledge and across the little bay of sand, his pale and blood-smeared face contorted with fury.

"Leave him to me, guv'nor!" he screamed.

"I'll settle him! Let me get at him, guv'nor!"

André thrust the excited, gesticulating little man backwards roughly. "Don't be an idiot, Jean," he said calmly.

"He turned on you, guv'nor! Let me deal with the swine!"

"He did not," retorted André. "If you touch him, I shall serve you the same."

"Oh, all right, guv'nor," Jean whined; "don't —" He stopped. "Done for him, guv'nor?" There was a hideous suggestion in his tones.

André started. For a brief moment it seemed as if he would fell to the ground the unwholesome little creature who stood plucking at his fingers and casting furtive glances at his comrade's lean, naked, motionless figure.

Then André let his arms fall to his side. "Jean," he said with biting scorn, "you are not exactly a minister of the Gospel. You are unfit for decent society, and your face is bloody; it offends me. Kindly go and wash it." He pointed to the sea, and stooped unconcernedly to attend to Kit, who now began to show signs of recovery.

Jean winced as if he had received a blow, and skulked away to do as he was bidden.

Like most undersized and grotesque men, Jean was inordinately vain. From no one but André

would he have swallowed such an insult; but the little man had that curious attachment for his grim "chief" which is born of absolute fear, the fear of a hound for his brutal master.

Of this André was fully aware. Innately a leader of men, he had never been afraid to probe the weak spots in the armour of his subordinates.

Some men will only give allegiance to authority that is brutal and without compassion, and to them consideration is but a sign of weakness, to be repaid by instant insubordination.

Suddenly Jean gave vent to a loud shout. The exuberance of joy expressed in the cry and the frenzied extravagance of his gestures could have but one meaning.

André spun round and shot a swift glance seawards. For the moment he saw nothing but sea, and the impenetrable, mocking film of mist floating over the distant reef. Then he, too, uttered a loud shout, which only served to show how rigidly he had been suppressing his own anxiety. Stooping quickly, he seized Kit under the arms and compelled him to stand upright.

"Look!" he cried in triumph.

Within a mile of them, just beyond the edge of the shadow cast by the cliffs, a boat was being propelled rapidly towards the shore.

CHAPTER II

THE COMING OF CAPTAIN BLACK

SILENCE fell upon the three naked men standing motionless at the water's edge. The monsoon wind had died away into a breathless calm; the lagoon, gently heaving, its surface changing like shot silk, now green, now blue, lay placid. As if wearied of everlastingly breaking, petty wavelets tinkled on the yellow sand, so faintly, so languidly, that in contrast the far-off clamour of the ocean swell still surging on the reef was emphasised and seemed close at hand.

A stone's throw from the shore, the boat, a small white-painted gig, swept a graceful curve and headed seawards; but at a quick gesture from the helmsman the two stolid, brown-skinned rowers (Kanakas, perchance, from some distant palm-studded island) ceased pulling, dipping their oars to keep the gig stationary.

The man seated in the stern sheets rose heavily and stood balancing himself with the tiller gripped

between his knees. Red striped pyjama trousers and a white drill coat, unbuttoned all the way down, revealing a blue-edged flannel singlet, covered his huge body; while a large, dilapidated sun-helmet shaded his mahogany-coloured visage. It was noticeable that the barrel of a rifle peeped over the gunwale of the gig.

At the sight of the three naked figures in front of him the newcomer appeared not a little perplexed, and for a while his gaze darted questioningly first to Jean, ankle-deep in the water, hesitating to advance, now to the other two standing side by side on the dry sand. Then the huge being began to chuckle, finally to burst into uncontrolled laughter, swaying from side to side, until the little craft rocked perilously beneath him.

"Captain Black?" André called out suddenly.

The man in the gig steadied himself, lowered his heavy eyebrows, and endeavoured to appear serious. Lifting his helmet, he bowed low in mock courtesy; but, as if something in André's steady gaze disconcerted him, he sought hastily in his pockets for a yellow bandanna, and made a show of mopping his shiny forehead.

"Captain Black?" repeated André.

"Ay. Black—or White," the man jerked out in a raucous bass voice, "as the case may be.

Sometimes one, sometimes t'other—but never Green—mark ye that. Names don't signify much in these latitoods. Ye'd agree there, I reckon." Plainly he was marking time, waiting for a lead.

"Black, then, on this occasion," suggested André leisurely, as if he had all day before him for a conference. "And we might be equally correct in saying 'of the schooner *Ninette*,' though I do not see her."

"Not likely to," retorted the big man; "but she's out there for all that," jerking his thumb in the direction of the reef, and adding deliberately, "And the name you mention ain't a bad 'un for a schooner. Not that it signifies, as I said before. A pot of paint, y'know, and—" raising a great fist in imitation of a painter handling a brush. "Ay. She's out there," he repeated abruptly.

"Schooner *Ninette;* Captain Black in command," André took him up in level tones. "Port of registry?" He spoke like a modern Board of Trade official, as though the matter was not of the slightest interest to him. Kit and Jean stared at their spokesman with uncomprehending eyes.

"On a job like this it don't signify," said Captain Black emphatically. Jean uttered a furious oath.

"Silence, Jean! Port of registry not stated," André continued. "From Noumea—bound to—"

"Ay. Noumea's right. But where was it you'd say she was bound to now?"

"That signifies much?"

"By Davy, it do!" The big man in the gig wagged his head and again made much use of his handkerchief; then he flourished it in the supposed direction of the schooner. "Not victualled for a voyage round about," he said weightily; "nor manned. Haven't got a mate. Left him behind on the beach. Best do these jobs single. Kanakas, ye understand, don't count—leastways these galoots don't—" He glared aggressively at his crew, daring them to dispute his last statement; then he turned round again, and waited for André's next communication with the self-satisfied air of a man who has given proof of his ability to deal with a problem requiring infinite tact and discretion.

André nodded his appreciation. "Well, Captain Black," he said, "in the circumstances, I will charter your schooner for a voyage; from the mouth of this little river to Sydney."

"Might be done, if the terms——"

"The terms are fixed," André rapped out, with a sudden change of tone which had visible effect on the man in the boat. "The document which you have probably left on board the schooner

mentions the sum of five hundred pounds, in English money."

"You know a deuce of a lot!" said the other, slowly, after a pause, during which he seemed to be searching for an appropriate reply, and, failing, had to fall back on deliberate rudeness.

"I know everything," retorted André coolly.

"Not quite,"—provokingly,— "not quite."

"*Sacré!*" burst out Jean, unable to restrain his impatience any longer. "What's the use of all this jaw? Here! you! fat hog! Back your beastly boat in at once! We're coming on board." And as he spoke he made a dash for the gig. The Kanakas grinned, and gave a couple of smart strokes with the oars. Captain Black snatched up the rifle, a Winchester repeater.

"Now then, Ugly," he sneered, "just stop where you are! You look as if a meal would do you good; and, by Botany Bay, you're on the road to getting a full breakfast of lead, you skinny little son of a—monkey!"

Jean took scant notice of the threat, and waded on after the boat, mouthing curses. Black raised the rifle slowly to his shoulder.

"Jean!" André called out.

Jean came to a sudden halt, swung round, and waded sulkily ashore again.

"That's the talk," remarked Captain Black approvingly, lowering the rifle. "Ever been to sea, mister?" he inquired of André for no apparent reason.

"No," shortly.

Captain Black asked the question with a motive. If André knew something of navigation, Black might be deemed superfluous—that was all. It was quite evident that he disregarded the others; they were of no account.

"No? Well, it's a pity, for you've the gift. I b'lieve I'd a' had to plug him, if you hadn't spoken. It all comes of trying to run with a head wind," Captain Black went on; "and that, as any seaman knows, is damn nonsense. Now, let's get things square-o, Liverpool fashion, meanin', of course, nice and shipshape. First item. I've a bill of lading for one; the charter-party you know such a bible about calls him —" he paused slightly. "Now!—you, that's so clever?"

"My name is John Andrews," replied André.

"Ay. That'll do. Come aboard, Mister John Andrews."

"All or none," returned André.

The big man shook his head. "My name's Black—not Green," he said. "I thought I told

you that from the first—to save any misunderstandings."

"All or none," repeated André firmly.

"'Tain't in the charter-party," objected the other doggedly.

"All or none"—again.

"Been teachin' a parrot, haven't you?" sneered the captain; but as his effort at sarcasm produced no effect, he began to bluster. "I've come to this dog-hole of a place to pick up a passenger, one John Andrews. That's my job—what I'm paid for—and what I'm goin' to do. I've no call to fill my schooner with a lot of beach-combers as thinks a sea voyage 'ud improve their complexions. I ain't paid to do that; I say, I ain't paid. And I reckon the best thing I can do is to go back the way I come—while I've got a sound throat on me—how'll that signify, Mister Andrews?"

"Not that," retorted André, with a snap of his finger and thumb. "As for being paid, do not forget, Captain Black—or White—the document, the charter-party—you are pleased to call it, though you are wrong—lacks a signature—my own—without which your five hundred sovereigns is—pouf!—a castle in Spain."

"Castle in flaming hell!" returned the big man. "Are you coming aboard, John Andrews?"

"Not alone."

"Then stop there, and rot," rapped out Captain Black, and, turning away, he seated himself heavily on the stern thwart. As he did so, the face of the Kanaka nearest him lit up with sudden interest.

"Capena," the man croaked, pointing, "mana come 'longa shore."

Captain Black slewed round, and sprang to his feet again.

Streaming round the point at the mouth of the little river, he perceived a band of savages leaping from boulder to boulder of the rocks, which were once more left bare by the falling tide.

As they made a dash for the boat, André caught his companions by the arms, holding them back by main force.

"John Andrews!" bellowed Captain Black. "Come on!" He stormed at the Kanakas to back the gig inshore.

"All or none," shouted André.

"The bluff's off!" roared the captain, flinging his arms about wildly. All chance of earning his five hundred pounds seemed to be vanishing.

André laughed, and, letting go his grip of his comrades' arms, joined in their wild rush towards the boat.

"Double-bank the oars, blast ye!" thundered Captain Black, as Kit and Jean tumbled in over the gunwale. "Pull, ye naked devils! Pull like —blazes!" Then he snatched up the rifle and began methodically to "brown" the oncoming savages. It was very evident that "trouble" and Captain Black were no strangers. It was only the prospect of pecuniary loss that caused him excitement.

As André clambered aboard, the gig was already on the move. A shower of spears hurtled round the little craft. With a groan the Kanaka on Kit's thwart bent double over the loom of his oar, a spearpoint protruding between his shoulder-blades.

One oar thus encumbered and useless, the gig pivoted round, broadside on, and priceless moments were wasted before Kit could thrust the wounded man clear and let him drop on the gratings at the bottom of the boat. Again and again the rifle cracked, and between each shot Captain Black bellowed red-hot oaths at the lubberliness of his crew.

Not a few of the savages fell on the sand or in the shallows, and of the survivors, all except their leader and one other, beat a disorderly retreat, uttering frightful yells.

Frenzied with rage because his quarry was finally escaping him, and relying, no doubt, on the immunity from harm afforded him by the skulls of former vanquished enemies now dangling at his priestly girdle, the leader, who was the "wizard" of the night before, pressed onwards, calling out loud encouragements to his one faithful follower.

Black fired; but still the wizard seemed unharmed, and darting in under the point of the rifle, he clutched at the gunwale; then he fell backwards, his own skull smashed in by the descending rifle-butt. The other savage, making for the bows and finding himself viciously attacked with a boathook by the remaining Kanaka, made a snatch at the weapon and jerked his assailant overboard, dashing out his brains with a club as he pitched forward.

The victory was short-lived, for Black leant over the side, and thrusting out the rifle with one hand, jammed the muzzle against the cannibal's breast and shot him dead.

The gig straightened and drew out from the shore; Captain Black dropped the rifle and grasped the tiller.

"By Barking Creek!" he panted, scowling at Kit and Jean. "What a gory mess! But these

two block ornaments 'll have to work their passage, Mister Andrews, or I'll be sugared."

"They will do so," André replied curtly. He had turned his back resolutely on the island.

The tide was at half ebb, and the gig made fair progress. Young as the day was, the sky was brazen; every cloud had wilted away, dissipated by a merciless sun. The wind was up and down, a very Paddy's hurricane.

Already the far-stretching coast of the receding island quivered as in a mirage, the peak of distant Mount Kopeto seeming to hover, unstable, fantastic, over the skyline of the cliffs, writhing snake-like in the heat. Distorted sun-globes, acutely painful to the eye, flashed and twisted in the wake astern, and at every stroke of the oars the clamour of the reef grew louder, bringing with it a sense of almost physical discomfort. In the little boat no word was spoken.

Captain Black gave his whole attention to the tiller, ever and anon turning his head to pick up his bearings for the reef passage. No guiding sight of the schooner's tapering masts could be gained through the hazy spray-film over the coral barrier.

Kit and Jean bent to the oars with dogged perseverance; their minds overflowed with exultation. Every stroke they took thrust the burden

of years of exile and forced labour on the hated island further into the past, every stroke carried them nearer to that last ring-fence of coral, to the vessel that was waiting beyond—to freedom! The very thought lent superhuman energy to their straining muscles, and caused the twain to forget utterly their hunger and the smart of their blistering skins.

As for their leader, in silent assumption of a privilege beyond dispute, he remained an idle passenger; for the present his brain was at a standstill, finding rest and solace in the wonders offered to his gaze through the pellucid waters.

Waving fronds, pencillings of greenery, the whole sea-floor one vast flower-bed of coral, at once the playground and the hiding-place of a myriad rainbow-hued fish—his keen eyes noted all this with an artistic relish. The doors of the past, the past dragged out on the receding island, were closed for ever. For the future, André had long matured his plans.

At last the gig drew near to the reef; a slanting break showed in the interminable line of surging waters. Caught by the ebb of the tide, the gig skimmed through a glass-smooth channel veined like marble. For a brief second the bottom flew up to meet them, to thrust them back; then, foiled, it

sank again. On either side seethed caldrons of boiling, hissing white foam; a quick lift of the boat, a smother of spray, tingling and blinding—and the thunder of the reef was behind them. They were through, riding with careless rein on the bare-backed chargers from Mother Ocean's stables.

"There!" Captain Black jerked out, pointing ahead.

Kit and Jean ceased pulling, and stared eagerly seawards. Half a mile away, a schooner, her sails lowered, but loose and ready for hoisting, strained at her cable as though she were a creature alive and filled with a wild impatience to be gone.

Captain Black mopped vigorously at his forehead, and, half turning round, shook his fist in mock anger at the reef. "There's only two men in this world knows how to take that passage, Mister Andrews," he said, "and I learnt how, this morning for the first time, from Uncle Joe."

His gaze fell inquiringly on the huddled form of the Kanaka at the bottom of the boat.

"Stiff as a faggot," said Kit, callously; the first words he had spoken since recovering from the effect of André's blow.

"Then there's only me left," the captain went on. He stooped and made a quick examination of the prostrate Kanaka. "Don't carry a saw-

bones," he growled. "Anyway, it don't signify, far as Uncle Joe's consarned." Then, lifting the body, he levered it over the gunwale with the spear-shaft. The corpse sank slowly, face uppermost. To André, leaning over and watching with careless interest, the brown face seemed to leer up at him malignantly, and the outstretched, swaying arms seemed to wave him a mocking farewell, until, caught by an undercurrent, the dead man rolled over and faded into the blue of the submarine.

"Lost two, got two," Captain Black observed with clumsy facetiousness. "Jack's down, Jim's up, as the saying is." Then, after a pause, he broke out, "But you'll darned well have to work your passage, blast ye! Give way, or as sure as I'm a Kalathumpian I'll send some of you to join Uncle Joe, and maybe he'll learn you how to handle an oar."

Jean leaned over the loom of his oar and returned the big man's scowl with interest. "Now, drop it—d'you hear?—drop it," he began.

"Pull, you fool!" growled Kit, turning savagely round on his thwart.

"Silence!" ejaculated André.

"Oh, all right, guv'nor!" Jean muttered sulkily. "But I look to take my orders from you—and you leave me alone!" he added viciously to Kit.

"Pull!" said André, in a voice like a curate's. "Let us get on board the schooner. And remember, Captain Black is in command. None of us will forget that."

For a moment Jean stared curiously at André with narrowed eyes. "Forget that, guv'nor?" he said at last with feigned humility. "Oh, trust me! I won't forget nothing."

"Ay, that's the talk," put in the Captain with a jeering laugh. "Don't you forget! And I'll remind ye, so as ye won't. Won't we be a happy family!" As the men resumed their labours he burst forth into a ribald song, beginning:—

> "Mother, come and tuck me up
> In my beautiful, little white cot,"

breaking off as they approached the schooner to hail two Kanakas who were standing on her foredeck jabbering together excitedly.

"Hoy, on deck, there! Not so much jawberee! Lay aft, ye dirty scuts, and pass that blanked ladder overside! And stand by with a line, blast ye! No, it's no use you lookin' for Uncle Joe, or Red Pepper neither. They're gone aloft, my sons, where you'll join 'em, if you don't get a —— move on you! And I've brought ye a man and a quarter of a man for shipmates in place of 'em;

and the one's dumb as a harness-cask, and t'other's no more'n a son of a— Look out, there, you in the bows!"

As he shouted the warning a coil of rope whirled through the air and fell with a thwack across the bows of the boat. Jean made a snatch at the rope, and secured the end round his thwart. It was smartly done.

"There's one of you's been to sea before," growled Captain Black, in grudging approval. "Leastways, if he didn't learn the trick in a flat-bottomed, full-bellied canal barge."

Lazily the little gig edged in, slid down the smooth back of a swell, then nestled affectionately against her parent's black-painted side. Her captain gave the schooner's planks a resounding slap with an open palm.

"No place like home," he cried; "and what's home without a mother? Now, Mister Andrews! you first; don't forget to take your hat off and wipe your shoes on the mat."

An hour later, light flaws from the south-east filled the schooner's sails and urged her gently towards the west. For long, André, attired in a loosely fitting suit of white drills, leaned over the stern rail. Motionless, he watched the hated

island of New Caledonia slowly fade, until only Kopeto's dark cone remained visible, phœnix-like, hovering in the sky over a golden haze. Then it, too, melted into nothingness and was gone.

"Twenty years!" he muttered. "Twenty years of torturing hell. . . . Yet what beauty it has bequeathed to this blessed hour!"

André leaned farther over the rail and stared at the name painted in crude large white letters across the schooner's counter—NINETTE—surrounded by a flamboyant scroll-work in vivid yellow, the work of a generous and painstaking artist, probably Black himself.

"Painted tempor'y, and special, by request, Mister. Easy to paint as drinkin' rum; all straight lines."

André wheeled round, and discovered Black standing behind him in evident amusement.

"Look again to-morrow—or next day or so, p'raps, and you won't see that name across her rump, Mister. But I'll grant it's not a bad name for the old lady," admitted the big seaman with condescension, screwing up his eyes as though the sun were too strong for them.

"You refer to the schooner?" said André with vague disinterest.

"Who else, Mister—Andrews?" retorted the

other, grinning. But suddenly, failing to brave André's direct and steely stare, he became serious, and began studying the sails, as if the problem of their trim taxed to the utmost even his vast experience of seamanship.

"Who, indeed!" echoed André quietly.

Captain Black grunted. "There's some tucker, coffee, and what-not on the cabin table," he said, after a pause, still studying the trim of the sails. "I come up to tell you. The others 'a got theirs forrard. And when you're full, I'll come down and find ye a pen and a bottle of ink, and then we'll be all square-o."

André turned away and went below.

"Ou—ay!" said Captain Black to himself. "Ou-ay! Very high and very mighty, Mister bloomin' Andrews! I come to pick up one—and I find three; and not a rag between 'em! Well, Mister High and Mighty, after what I heard down Noumea way, I reckon I can put a name to you—and it ain't Mister bloomin' the Archangel Gabriel neither. Not on my haffidavy, it ain't," added the big seaman. He repeated the last six words several times, as if they gave his tongue intense satisfaction.

CHAPTER III

JEAN PAYS OFF A SCORE

FROM Muèo Bay, on the west coast of New Caledonia, to Sydney the ocean track lies in a straight line. As Captain Black remarked, "Barrin' the Middleton and 'Liza Reefs (and they lay to the south'ard enough not to make me lose my beauty sleep), there's nothin' in the way for the old gal—meaning the *Ninette*, Mister—to butt up against."

Roughly, the distance is a little more than a thousand miles; and, allowing for the help that a navigator might reasonably expect during the latter part of the voyage from the south-westerly current which sweeps in towards and down the coast of Australia, Captain Black reckoned he would drop anchor inside Sydney Heads within a fortnight at the most.

As the *Ninette* drew away from the lee of the island the light flaws of wind from the south-east veered more easterly, strengthened in gentle puffs,

then settled down to a steady trade-wind. Overhead the deep, gorgeous blue of the sky was dotted with small dead-white clouds, like balls of cotton-wool, which, far down all around the complete circle of the horizon, seemed to be pressed together in one filmy mass. With her decks aslant, the schooner coquetted with the sun-jewelled waves, while the rippling hollows that had been shivering her snowy sails now filled out into smooth, bold, graceful curves.

Captain Black leaned over the taffrail and gazed at the water kissing the schooner's black side, as if loth to let her go; he judged the speed to be five knots. To his experienced eye, everything pointed to settled weather and a straightforward passage. The seaman was jubilant.

To his great relief—for, in spite of his bluster, Black had felt decidedly uneasy—"John Andrews" had put his signature without demur to the draft for £500 upon a New South Wales bank, which now reposed securely somewhere about the seaman's bulky person. Common-sense, of which the captain considered he had quite his fair share, told him that, once Sydney was reached, his £500 would materialise, if only as the price of a silent tongue; and, having received the reward for his services, Black would not be fool enough to incrimi-

nate himself by allowing his apparently habitually unruly member to wag.

It would not be "business"; for the Captain was well aware that, owing to past (unproved) traffickings of a very doubtful nature, he had a certain reputation, and it behoved him to be wary. But, putting that on one side, Black was honest enough according to his lights. He had every intention of carrying out his part of the bargain; and, it may be said, his honesty of intention was as natural to the man as a product of an ingrained seaman's instinct which caused him to regard "John Andrews" somewhat in the light of freight, shipped, and to be delivered.

The other two scallawags Black regarded merely as poor substitutes for the two lost Kanakas, whom a grimmer captain, one Davy Jones, had "signed on" upon the lid of his capacious locker in the ship of Death. Fears for his own personal safety Black had none; he had been brought up hard, had literally fought his way to command in his early sea career. He possessed an abnormal self-esteem, and, had confidence in himself been lacking, the extraordinary authority which "John Andrews" wielded over his two cut-throat companions would have reassured Black.

Within an hour of the embarkation there

had been trouble with the little man; a knife had been thrown, and even now it remained quivering as the vessel rose and fell, with its point buried in the woodwork of the wheel-box; then, before Black could lay hands on the thrower, "John Andrews" had sprung on deck from below, had caught the little man by the throat, and beaten him into insensibility. Black admitted that even he could not have done the job neater or more thoroughly.

The succeeding days passed by uneventfully enough. The one incident worthy of note was that Black went over the stern in a bowline and scraped *Ninette* from the counter, and repainted thereon the schooner's legitimate name, *Coal Sack*—a name derived from a peculiar dark blur within the constellation of the Southern Cross which is likened by sailors to a sack of coals.

They were, indeed, becoming "a happy family," as the captain had sarcastically prophesied. After the first inevitable "flare-up," no matter what wealth of provocative remarks, gorgeous in their colour-scheme, he might lavish on Kit and Jean for mistakes natural to landlubbers, the two new members of his crew returned not a single "back-answer."

Kit's face was inscrutable; he did his work in silence. Jean laughed, and chattered in French

which Black did not understand and would have taken as insulting, but let pass, because "John Andrews" assured him that what the little man said could not possibly be stretched so as to refer to the Captain even by implication.

In their leisure time, Kit and Jean remained forward of the mainmast; Black insisted upon this rule. "The cabin's for you and me, Mister," he had said to "John Andrews." And André had agreed that it should be so; and when he wished to hold consultations with his erstwhile companions—as he frequently did—"John Andrews" went forward himself to the bows of the schooner.

Of work there was little; it might have been a yachting trip. The crew kept calashee watches: they were all liable to be called upon to work when required.

"John Andrews" relinquished his rôle of passenger, and he soon proved that he was capable of taking the place of the mate, whom Black had left behind "upon the beach" at Noumea.

As for Captain Black himself, he was a confirmed believer in the conservation of energy. Across the stern of the schooner he rigged up an awning, just a worn-out jib stretched double from the taffrail to the vangs on either side, affording some degree of relief in the languorous, tropical

heat. Beneath this awning there was always a deck chair, of unusual dimensions and sturdiness, placed near the wheel and a little behind the helmsman.

On relieving "John Andrews," Captain Black would take one or two portentous turns along the deck, gaze at the horizon, then at the sails; and, eventually, he would lower himself into the chair, "just for a couple of minutes." There he would recline, smoking, and lazily watching the tiny ripples undulating from luff to leach across the snowy cotton canvas as the sails bellied and the schooner heeled over, to the accompaniment of a pitter-patter (like little scurrying footsteps) of the reef points.

Every now and again an ocean swell, out-distancing the still far-distant, stronger breeze that set it rolling, heaved up the stern of the little vessel, and running beneath her length, tilted the bows, jerking the spars against the mast and creating that all-pervading chorus of noises inherent in a sailing ship at sea.

To some, perhaps, the insistent chorus would have become maddening to the verge of desperation. To Captain Black it was a chant—Mother Ocean's lullaby—though one might reasonably have boggled at the word "lullaby" when used in connection with the huge seaman.

The "couple of minutes" would become ten, twenty, while his wide sun helmet tipped farther and farther over his glistening mahogany face; the cigar would droop between his fat lips, and go out; and presently heavy, regular breathings would proclaim to the stolid Kanaka helmsman (Kit and Jean were never allowed to take the wheel) that his captain was keeping an untroubled watch in his usual manner. At night it was different; Captain Black could not forget Jean's aptitude for knife slinging.

Navigation, also, was not one of Black's strong points; as a science, he professed to regard it with some scorn. He claimed (erroneously enough) to belong to the "old school." A "shot" at the sun at noon to reckon his latitude; the log to tell the speed (though he preferred to judge it by eyesight alone); the compass to mark the course; for the rest, "rule of thumb": these constituted his method of traversing the ocean. And a lifelong experience of making port after port with astonishing accuracy did not tend to make him aspire to more "new-fangled" ideas.

"Hull, Hell, and Halifax!" he had remarked naïvely to "John Andrews" at the end of a preliminary discussion about the voyage. "Poke the old bitch's nose straight and leave her alone, and she'll smell her way across."

Or, as he observed daily at noon when he pored over an ancient chart that cried out for the cleansing bread-crumbs: "There y'are!"—the tip of a stubby forefinger covering many square miles of ocean—"there or thereabouts, within a mile or two, one way or t'other. Leastways, it's near enough."

And by that last phrase alone, had he been a seafaring man with a knowledge of South Sea skippers, "John Andrews" might have known that he was in the presence of the notorious "Near-enough-Black."

The voyage took longer than had been anticipated. It was sunset on April 14th before the schooner *Coal Sack*, with but three men visible on deck, slipped inside Sydney Heads and anchored in Watson's Bay.

Black explained his short-handedness by means of a faked log book, and the plausible lie that two members of his crew had been washed overboard during a storm. He was congratulated on bringing his vessel safely to port, and informed that in the morning he was to proceed up the harbour to a berth at Miller's Wharf. Then he was left by the authorities to a "well-earned" rest.

But just before midnight a boat was lowered over the *Coal Sack's* side, dropping noiselessly to the

water from well-oiled tackles; and an hour later three men stepped ashore upon an unfrequented beach not far from the seaside resort of Manly. From the boat Captain Black watched them disperse in different directions; then he pulled back to the schooner.

Captain Black bade the Kanakas hoist in the boat, while he himself went down to his cabin, where he lifted the lid of a locker which had not been opened throughout the voyage, and took out a bottle of whiskey. The night was almost unbearably close and hot; a "southerly buster" was brewing, and until it came there would be no relief. Black perspired freely. The return journey from the shore to the schooner, when he had been forced to do the pulling himself, had taxed his energy to its limit.

Having found a dirty pannikin, and wiped it clean with his red bandanna, he sat down on a settee and partook of a refresher; but, finding the cabin stifling, he clutched his bottle and pannikin and went on deck, where he subsided into his favourite chair near the taffrail. Then he proceeded to drink, methodically making up for arrears.

He quickly got through the quarrelsome stage, because there was no one to fight with; Kanakas

"did not count," even when he was in liquor. The maudlin state was not part of his repertoire, so he passed on to the humorous stage, which, with Black, was the perihelion of intoxication.

He sang songs which are unprintable; his "patter" was worse; and, finally, he imagined himself standing again in the little boat, rocking to and fro just beyond the breakers, while he shouted with laughter at the sight of three naked scarecrows with funny-looking straw hats on their heads, who stared at him from a strip of bright yellow sand — the dark cliffs behind them — a band of brown savages brandishing spears and clubs, and racing over the rocks at the point.

Again and again the drunken man reconstructed the scene, and each time more confusedly, until it all became an inextricable, jumbled nightmare, with but one thing standing out clear and insistent —the ratlike face of a little man leaning over the loom of his idle oar and "daring" him with unwinking, cruel eyes.

Presently Captain Black began to wag his head uneasily, as if he were trying to dispel the vision from his drink-sodden brain. Then, suddenly, his eyes opened wide and fixed themselves with stupid intensity upon Jean, in the flesh, crouching

before him with an arm bent back in the attitude of throwing.

Black made a supreme effort to jerk himself upright, but the heavy head lagged, the chin tilted upwards; and, in that instant, something, white-hot, seemed to leap out of the darkness and burn its way deep into his throat.

The chair swayed, creaked loudly, then collapsed sideways, spilling its huge burden upon the deck.

With incredible savagery, Jean kicked the twitching mass into absolute stillness; then he clambered swiftly over the stern rail, dropped into a boat, and disappeared whence he had come.

A little later the Kanaka, who had been drowsily keeping anchor-watch forward, came aft to look at the clock at the top of the companion stairs. He wanted to find out how much longer he must keep awake before arousing his sleeping companion to relieve him.

The Kanaka caught sight of Black's huddled form, grunted, and stooped carelessly to loosen the clothing at the neck. He had been taught to do so, and he was fond of his Captain in a fatalistic sort of way. His fingers encountered the knife; he drew them away—wet. Then he sped forward.

Shortly two dark forms crept aft. A hurried consultation over the body—and a few moments later the mainsail began to creep slowly up the mast. A jib was cast loose and hoisted; then the anchor light went out, and the end of a cable rasped through the hawse-pipe and sank with a splash beneath the water.

Silently, like a grey ghost, the *Coal Sack* glided out beyond the Heads. In the south, where sea and sky merged in one ink-black curtain, there was a vivid flash of lightning, followed by a sudden cold gust of wind, which died away as suddenly in heavy rain, leaving the schooner rolling to the swell, her sails flapping like helpless wings, and threatening to jerk the masts overboard. In stolid silence the Kanakas awaited the furious squall which they knew lurked behind the pall of rain. One grasped the spokes of the kicking wheel, the other stood by the main-sheet.

For the coming storm they had nothing but welcome, certainly no fear. But, strangely enough, though they had no conception of the meaning of "circumstantial evidence," their fear of the justice of the white man was immeasurable.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

THE PINK SUNBONNET

ONCE more the smooth glide above the gravel ripple became wrinkled by the rise of a big trout. For the last half-hour the same coveted fish had been feeding with annoying regularity; annoying, because the angler, peering up-stream from behind a stunted willow bush, had so far failed to discover what tiny insect it was that Master Trout found so tempting to his fastidious palate.

Flies there were in myriads, whirling in clusters above the water, or sailing jauntily down-stream, with their dainty, transparent wings a-cock; but the "imitation," however carefully offered, only had the effect of putting the shy fish "down"; though presently, on being given a few minutes' rest to recover confidence, he would resume his interrupted meal. But at last persistent watchfulness brought its reward.

The Honourable Trevor Wyer tied on his cast the most diminutive imitation of a pale watery dun he could find in his ragged old fly-book, and waded cautiously into the river. Two or three overhead twirls of the line to get the proper length for the throw, and then——

"Damn!" ejaculated the Hon. Trevor, with great fervour, and let the current trail his line.

The fish had been "put down" with a vengeance! Probably for hours to come.

Wyer stooped and made a vicious grab at a boat's scull which came bobbing down the gravel ripple and threatened to knock against his knees; then he waded to the bank again, flung the cause of offence upon the grass, and reeled in his line.

"You blessed tea-spoon!" he soliloquised, eyeing the small, brightly varnished scull with disfavour. "You're enough to scare an old dog-pike, let alone a critical gentleman like my trout. Monogram, too—'G'—in old gold; it ought to be new. I fancy I can put a name to your owner. H'm! a fair damsel in distress, for a fiver."

He looked up-stream, half expecting to catch sight of a boat more or less helplessly drifting down the reach after the missing scull. Seeing nothing, he lighted a pipe, and, shouldering the scull and his rod, set out along the river bank in search.

A trudge of nearly a mile brought Wyer to a sharp bend of the river. Here the current became swift, brawling noisily down a long ford, at the top of which, broadside, on a submerged ledge of rock a few yards from the bank, was a small outrigged pleasure boat jammed hard and fast.

A girl dressed in serviceable brown holland and a pink haymaker's sunbonnet sat calmly in the middle of the boat, watching Wyer's approach.

Arriving opposite the boat, Wyer thrust the spear of his rod into the ground, and raised his cap. He now felt more tolerant of the interruption of his sport. The girl in the boat was decidedly attractive.

In a masculine way, he approved of her dress, especially the old-fashioned sunbonnet; and he was vastly relieved that though his prognostication about the owner of the drifting scull being a damsel had proved correct, the damsel herself at any rate did not exhibit any signs of distress. The girl, however, was in a very awkward, not to say dangerous, predicament.

"Hit me on the legs," Wyer called out cheerfully, holding up the scull.

"I am very sorry," the girl replied.

"You ought to be glad," retorted Wyer, coming down the bank to the water's edge.

"I am," she said, and laughed. "I began to think I was to stay here for the rest of my life. I can't swim, and the current is too strong for me to wade ashore."

"Jolly good thing you didn't try," observed Wyer. "It's a nasty place; close on three feet deep, too. Let's see." He prodded the channel between them several times with the butt of the scull.

"The bottom is smooth rock, and very slippery. I tried it myself with the boat-hook. Shall I throw it to you?" she asked, reaching for the pole. Wyer noticed that her left hand was bandaged with a handkerchief.

"Sit still," he said sharply. He stepped gingerly into the water, and using the scull as a support, waded slowly across to the boat without mishap. Planting his feet firmly on the submerged rock, he stooped and placed the scull ready for use alongside its fellow.

"Now!" he said curtly. "Go and sit in the stern." The girl gave him a quick look, half resenting the peremptoriness of his tone; but she obeyed him.

"We shall have to go down, whether we like it or not," he remarked, levering the boat off the rock. "Look out! She's off!" Then, as the strong

current caught the stern, he stepped nimbly into the bows and crouched, balancing himself, while they were swept rapidly to the tail of the ford.

They did not speak during the struggle to the top again. On his part, Wyer appreciated her regard for his breath, for the ford had the deserved reputation of being one of the longest and most difficult on the river.

"Thank you," the girl said simply, when quiet water was gained. "I can manage now. I hope you are not very wet."

"Dry as a bone," returned Wyer, lying manfully, for the water had surged over the top of his waders, and his legs were soaked. "What's the matter with your hand?"

"I pinched it against the rowlock when I lost the scull," she replied, guiltily. "I was bringing the boat round the lower end of the island there, and the current caught me unawares; and in the excitement of the moment I'm afraid I caught a crab! But don't let me keep you from your fishing any longer. I am sorry to have been such a nuisance. Really, I can manage quite well now; it is all easy water up above."

"Let me see your hand," demanded Wyer.

"It is nothing—really."

Wyer pulled in to the bank, and made the boat fast to a willow branch.

"Let me see your hand," he repeated. Then, as she looked rebellious, he leaned forward, took hold of her wrist, and unwound the bandage. There was a blood-blister the size of a sixpence on the inside of her thumb, just where it would chafe in gripping a scull.

"H'm," he observed, "you can't possibly pull with a thumb like that. And it has burst."

"That was very rude of you," the girl said indignantly, as he released her hand.

Wyer made no reply; but, getting out of the boat, he went to fetch his rod. He took one of the sculls with him.

"You are taking my scull," she remarked rather frigidly.

"Merely as a precaution," Wyer called out over his shoulder.

"Oh, you are horrid!"

Presently he returned with his rod, and, untying the boat, got in and began pulling steadily up-stream. For a while neither of them spoke; apparently the girl found much to interest her on the banks.

"Don't you think I had better get out and walk?" she inquired suddenly.

"Why?"

"We seem to have been opposite that tree for a long time"—pointedly.

"That's not quite true. And isn't it a bit ungrateful?"

"No," the girl replied innocently. "I meant it must be very hard work for you."

"I like it," Wyer retorted. "We shall get along better presently."

"There is nearly a mile to go yet—and there are several fords," she added a little maliciously, after a pause.

Wyer grinned. "Oh!" he remarked carelessly, "I thought just now you said it was all easy water."

"It is for me," the girl replied stiffly. "I am used to it."

"So am I," returned Wyer.

"Indeed!"

"Yes, I was brought up on this part of the river."

"Oh!"

"I say!" ejaculated Wyer, after a long silence. "Don't let us quarrel." The girl raised her eyebrows in polite surprise and looked him straight in the face. She had eyes of so delightful a shade of brown that Wyer felt unrepentant of his last remark.

"Quarrel!" she said. "I do not quarrel with people I do not know."

"That is easily remedied," Wyer answered pleasantly. "My name is Wyer—Trevor Wyer."

"Oh!"

"Why do you say 'Oh!' like that?"

"My name is Gautil," she said, as though the mere mention of her name ought to convey some meaning to him.

"Does that explain it?" he inquired.

"I thought, perhaps, it would," the girl replied, somewhat embarrassed. "Are you not Lord Janesford's son?"

"Yes," Wyer answered with a puzzled look, "but I'm afraid I am no wiser."

"Well, you see," the girl began slowly, "we are your tenants at Seckley Cottage."

"So I heard," Wyer put in. "But what of that? I'm very glad that the old place is let at last."

"Oh, we have been there two years," she went on. "But I am afraid that fact does not please your father. My father reads out extracts from Lord Janesford's letters at breakfast; that is how I know."

Wyer made a grimace. "My governor is rather crusty at times," he admitted. "It's the

gout, you know. But that needn't make any difference to us, need it?"

"No"—doubtfully; "at least, I think not."

"I'm so glad you agree," he said gravely. "It would be rather hard lines for a son to be held responsible for his father's letters; and my governor wields the pen rather fiercely when he likes, as I know to my cost. You see, I've only just got back home after six years in Australia, and as I haven't seen his lordship yet (he's in Ireland, you know; we have an old ruin there he's rather partial to, though it's in a bog and always gives him rheumatism or gout or something) I know nothing about his squabbles. A bit disrespectful that, eh?"

"It is—rather."

"Well, you see," Wyer said, in excuse, "we never hit it off very well. He wanted me to stay at home here and loaf about, hunt, shoot, and fish, and all that kind of thing, and I wouldn't have it; so I cleared out to the Colonies, and did a bit of work. But our old bailiff died a few months ago and the governor wrote—rather nicely for the governor—and said I could come back, and—well, offered me the job of looking after the estate—what's left of it," he added ruefully.

"The work leaves you time for fishing," she

remarked. "Oh, that's rude. I beg your pardon."

Wyer's eyes twinkled. "I can always squeeze in time for fishing," he said slyly. "It's a most fascinating sport—er—when people don't lose their sculls and send them floating down-stream to frighten all the trout in the river."

"It is the first time I have ever done such a thing," cried the girl, half vexed, half laughing.

"Left, please," she said suddenly. "That is our landing-stage over there. And I see my mother is waiting for me."

They had reached a part where the willows fringing the right bank had been entirely cut away. A broad sweep of meadow, almost park land, with here and there single pollarded oaks, ran in a gentle slope to the edge of the river. Beyond, the meadow merged into orchard; and beyond that again, high grass banks marked terraced lawns extending on the right-hand side to a walled garden, on the left to the woods that stretched as far as the eye could see down the river.

Up on the hillside in a background of copper beeches nestled Seckley Cottage, a half-timbered residence in oak and faded red brick, once the Dower House of the Janesford family, and until

let on long lease to its present tenants, fast being allowed to degenerate into a picturesque ruin set in an overgrown wilderness. Now the whole property spoke of a lavish expenditure on its up-keep from the very incongruous-looking vivid green jalousies recently added to the house itself, to the neat rustic boathouse and concrete landing-steps upon which Mrs. Gautil was standing.

Wyer took it all in at a glance. Somehow the general spick and span appearance of the little estate did not please him. Illogically enough, he preferred the old place in rags and tatters, as it were, as he had last seen it before leaving England.

As soon as the boat drew in to the landing-stage the girl sprang out, before Wyer could offer to assist her. Encumbered by his waders, he got out of the boat more slowly, and made fast the painter to a post. Then he turned and raised his cap to Mrs. Gautil, who was looking with mild astonishment and inquiring eyes at her daughter.

Mrs. Gautil was a small, pleasant, rather frail woman, apparently about forty, with hair slightly streaked with grey.

Like her daughter, she was dressed very simply. She wore no hat, but carried an elaborate sunshade of bright peacock-green with a white lining. She

gave the appearance of being a little delicate and very reserved in a gentle sort of way.

Something about her suggested that she was not of English birth, a suggestion which became more apparent when she spoke. It was quite plain that she had given her eyes to her daughter; and, standing cap in hand waiting to be introduced, the Hon. Trevor Wyer found himself prepared to like Mrs. Gautil for that reason alone.

"Celeste," murmured Mrs. Gautil vaguely, as if reminding her daughter of a duty to be performed.

"Mr. Wyer—my mother," said the girl, adding: "I lost my scull and got stuck on a stupid rock. Mr. Wyer brought the scull back to me and got the boat off, and very kindly pulled me home. I hurt my thumb a little—it is nothing."

"Celeste, dear, you really must be more careful," said her mother, in gentle reproof. "You are so late, I quite thought something dreadful had happened." Then, turning to Wyer, she thanked him politely for his services, and asked, with a certain diffidence, if he would care to accompany herself and her daughter to the house and take tea. Mrs. Gautil knew that "Wyer" was the Janesford family name.

Wyer declined, giving his costume as an excuse. "And I am rather wet," he said.

"Oh!" ejaculated Celeste, glancing reproachfully at him.

"It is only a trickle," he added hastily. "It has just got down to my feet—standing up, you see."

"Celeste, dear," said Mrs. Gautil, "go to the house and tell Hatt to get the dog-cart ready to drive Mr. Wyer home."

"Oh! not for me, please," Wyer protested. "It is such a long way round to the Hall by road, and if I might borrow the dinghy I could get home much quicker by water. I will send the boat back to-night by one of our men."

"Of course," said Mrs. Gautil. "But there is no need to send the boat back to-night. Some time to-morrow will do quite well. Do not let us keep you; I should not like you to catch cold through your kindness to my daughter."

Wyer made his adieux and stepped into the boat. For a few moments mother and daughter watched him pull down-stream with long, swinging strokes; then the elder lady turned away.

"Come, Celeste, dear," she urged gently; "you must want a cup of tea. I rather like that young man's face," she added inconsequently, as they walked slowly up the meadow; "but I do not know what your father would say."

"He's very plain," returned her daughter disparagingly; "and he's shockingly untidy." But she made a mental reservation that plainness of feature and untidiness in dress were not always unbecoming to some men, though Miss Gautil's experience of mankind was of the very slightest.

The Hon. Trevor Wyer lived in solitary state, occupying one wing of Janesford Hall, a rambling old mansion tucked away in the woods in an out-of-the-way corner of Worcestershire. An elderly man-servant and his wife shared the duties of looking after Wyer's personal needs and comforts, and acted in the capacity of caretakers of that part of the mansion which was given over to idle furniture and a dreary array of dust-sheets.

As Wyer told Celeste Gautil, the present Lord Janesford preferred to spend most of his time on another estate in Ireland, leaving the Worcestershire property to the tender mercies of the late bailiff, and, until his son returned to fill the vacant post, Janesford Hall, with its blinds persistently down.

Of his mother, Lady Janesford, Wyer had no recollection, having, by reason of his own entrance into this world, cost that gentle creature her life—a misfortune to which the Hon. Trevor in his heart

attributed the fact that he and his father could never live together without friction.

Indeed, it was said about the countryside that Lord Janesford never forgave his son for being the innocent cause of his wife's death. Whether that were true or not, his lordship's dislike of residing at, or even visiting, Janesford Hall dated from the day his consort had died there.

On the morning after his first acquaintance with the tenants of Seckley Cottage, coming in keen set from an early tramp round the home farm, Wyer found two letters awaiting him on the breakfast table. The upper envelope was addressed in his father's loose, almost illegible, scrawl; and, knowing that parental correspondence was apt to be disturbing, Wyer, like a wise man, turned his attention to more pleasant matters—to wit, his eggs and bacon; and, let it be confessed, certain fascinating mind-pictures of the owner of a pink sunbonnet and the most bewitching, uncommon, brown eyes he thought he had ever beheld.

Breakfast and his reflections having induced a sense of complacency, Wyer lighted a pipe and reached out a hand for his letters. The missive from his father proved characteristic, though of a much milder nature than was expected.

"Dear Wyer," the letter began. "Have your own way about the farms. So long as the rents are paid I do not want to be bothered further. In any case, you cannot do worse than Pooler (the late bailiff). I had it in my mind to get a look at you to see if Australia had knocked some of your confounded democratic—Lord, how I hate the word!—notions out of you. You needed it.

"N. B.—You are not to let the shooting. If I am in Queer-street I will not have retired drapers and tripe-dressers aping the gentlemen in my coverts. I did not say so in my last letter but you pleased me by coming home promptly when I sent for you. You may consider yourself master at Janesford, it will be yours soon enough.

"That reminds me. The fellow Pooler let Seckley Cottage to has recently been writing direct to me, offering to buy. Dash his impudence! What is the world coming to? Who the devil is he? I have never met him, and do not intend to, please God. I understood from Pooler he has spent a mint of money on the place, and painted the house up like a confounded Italian ice-cream shop.

"However, I bled him over his rent, and he pays regularly, which is something. Keep an eye on the trees. These retired hucksters would cut

down the finest oak to make a stand for a flower-pot. I know the breed.

"JANESFORD.

"P.S.—I see your letter says Hafaryn has littered. I thought the old bitch was dead. If you can pick a likely dog among them you can send him over. I have the gout, and cannot travel as arranged. It is unlikely I shall come to Janesford this year. Not that I suppose you care.—J."

Like that of the proverbial woman, Lord Janesford's postcript contained his real reasons for writing. Wyer tossed his father's letter somewhat disrespectfully aside, and, ripping open the second envelope, read as follows:

"NELLIST'S HOTEL, LONDON.

"MY DEAR WYER,—When we said good-bye at the docks you were kind enough to express the hope that should I ever happen to be in your neighbourhood I would look you up. Curiously enough, I am passing through Worcestershire shortly, and, if convenient to you, should be very glad to renew the pleasurable intimacy formed during the weeks we were thrown together in the *Orassa*. Apart from the personal motive, your description of Janesford Hall and the country around has fired me with a keen wish to appreciate

their charms with my own eyes. May I, then, trespass for a few days on your hospitality, or, perhaps I should say, that of your father, Lord Janesford?

"Yours sincerely,

"GEORGE HERON."

"By all the gold in Ballarat, you may!" exclaimed Wyer, when he had finished reading the letter. He went at once to a writing-table in the window and dashed off a cordial invitation to the man who had been his cabin companion on the homeward voyage from Sydney, to come "when he liked," and stay "as long as he liked."

Wyer was genuinely delighted, not only because he had sojourned long enough in the most genial of Colonies to be imbued with her true spirit of open hospitality, but because he, too, experienced that very unusual desire, a desire to carry on ashore an acquaintanceship formed on board a steamer.

In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the spurious intimacy of cabin mates, or, for that matter, of passengers in general, never survives the scurry and bustle caused by the advent of baggage agents (most "pushful" of mortals) at the docks, polite though hurriedly murmured

wishes to the contrary notwithstanding. George Heron, in Wyer's opinion, was a "rattling good sort," "one of the best."

When a young man in the twenties applies such expressions to a man who seems old enough to be his father, one may usually assume that the young man has been flattered by an interest shown towards him by his elder.

But the Hon. Trevor Wyer had passed the stage when his self-esteem might have been tickled by George Heron's evident desire to be friendly. That desire had been so tactfully displayed, and the man himself had such an engaging and interesting personality, that Wyer had been compelled, almost, to respond.

His invitation to his cabin mate at the docks had been perfectly sincere; and it was all the more hearty because he felt sanguine that George Heron would find favour with Lord Janesford. Nevertheless, Wyer now felt a trifle relieved that his friend would not have to pass the test of his lordship's critical eye.

Another thing that enabled Wyer to feel resigned to his father's absence was the injunction laid upon him to keep a watchful eye on the trees at Seckley Cottage, a duty the Hon. Trevor quickly decided he would begin forthwith.

He suddenly remembered he had not yet given any orders concerning the return of the dinghy he had borrowed the day before, and it occurred to him that it would, perhaps, be only polite to take the boat back in person.

Four o'clock that afternoon found Wyer approaching the Seckley landing-steps. Glancing over his right shoulder as he came in sight of the house, he perceived a figure in a brown holland dress standing at the edge of the upper lawn, and apparently gazing down towards the river.

With a philosophy that was at least hopeful, he made fast the boat to the mooring-post, and, pulling out a pipe, awaited events. They came to him in the person of the wearer of the brown holland dress, a little breathless, as if she had been running.

"Oh!" exclaimed Celeste Gautil, as she arrived at the top of the steps and looked down. "I thought it was one of your men; and I ran down to tell him what to do with the boat."

Wyer pocketed his pipe. "I hoped you would come," he replied truthfully. "I was wondering what to do with the dinghy"—untruthfully.

He ran up the steps and held out his hand. "How do you do?" he inquired.

CHAPTER II

GEORGE HERON

THE light bay mare between the shafts of the high dog-cart fretted and fussed, refusing to stand still. Of aristocratic descent, strongly conservative, she wished to express her disgust with the modern plebeian monster now hissing forth its vulgar steam breath as it left the little railway station of Ardley.

"Steady, Primrose!" The Hon. Trevor Wyer coaxed her. "Steady, old girl!" Then he flourished his whip in the direction of a man who at that moment emerged from the booking-hall, followed by a youthful, bow-legged porter carrying a capacious leathern kit-bag.

"Hullo, Heron! Thundering glad to see you." The expression upon Wyer's healthily red, good-humoured face was a welcome in itself. "Don't mind the mare," he went on; "she's pretending she's never seen a train before. She'll be all right as soon as we get started."

"I'm not nervous," replied George Heron, with a smile, glancing approvingly at the mare. Without more ado, he came quickly to the side of the lurching dog-cart and sprang in, barely touching the step with his foot.

Heron was slightly above the average height; and a loose suit of tweeds somehow gave the effect of trying to conceal bulkiness. Bulkiness, however, when applied to Heron, is not a very apt term. Had he been shorter, "stockiness," perhaps would be more suitable to his build.

There was determination in the eyes and in the jaw beneath the grey, pointed beard; the moustache, curiously enough, was of a much darker hue; undeniably a strong face, bronzed with that unmistakable sallow tinge that stamps men who have passed many years in hot climates. In age, Heron was certainly on the wrong side of forty.

Judging from his general appearance, the agility he had displayed was distinctly remarkable, and it called forth the comment from Wyer:

"No need to ask how you are!" Then to the porter: "Bag in, Jim? Right, then. Stand clear. Now, Primrose, away you go."

They swung out of the little station approach, shaving the post of the big white gate, and turned sharply to the right over the ivy-covered bridge

spanning the line. The mare gave one quick burst of speed up the steep hill; then, apparently, she came to the conclusion that, perhaps, after all, her behaviour was a little unladylike, and she settled down sedately to the long climb in front of her.

"Thought you'd think better of it," observed her driver.

"Nothing like hard work to cure the fidgets," said Heron, "in man or beast."

Wyer laughed. "Oh, Primrose only pretends," he replied. "Don't you, old girl?" He drew the lash of the whip gently across her neck, and the mare tossed her head daintily in response. Then he half turned round and pointed down the valley behind them.

"What do you think of it?" he asked "Could Australia beat that, eh? Whoa, Primrose. Take it easy for a bit, old girl, while we fill our souls with Nature's own beauty spot. I didn't know I was so poetic!"

"No," said Heron, after a pause. He spoke slowly, in tones of genuine appreciation. "In nowhere but England could you get such a view as that. It is—I have no adjective for it—it is just England; neither grand nor startling; yet it steals on the senses, and every jot pleases.

"Look at that vivid splash of green on the edge of the golden brown of the oaks," continued Heron. "And the river, it is not too insistent; it is more a succession of pools. One expects a trickling waterfall between each. What is the village down there?"

He pointed over the trees to a tiny cluster of cottages, some of red brick and tiles mellowed by time and weather into harmony with the surrounding colours; others of black, and white, and grey tarred oak, humble whitewash, and ancient thatching straw.

"That's Seckley village," replied Wyer. "The line of poplars you can see in the far distance running right up the opposite bank marks the end of the Janesford property; on this side the estate comes up to the road we are in. It is nearly all forest land on both sides; button or scrub oak for the most part.

"The Hall itself is a good seven miles from here, down on the right beyond that point of the wood. Beaudelay is our proper station, but I told you in my letter to come on to Ardley, because I wanted you to get your first impressions from here. Glad you like it. The road home isn't too bad, either."

"Like it!" cried Heron. "I am enchanted. Goodness knows, I am no sentimentalist, but

I have known scenery appeal to me when I was starving and shirtless."

Wyer laughed, and chirruped to the mare to get on. "Well, you'll get plenty of appeals in this neighbourhood," he remarked, "though I'm bound to say I staked my reputation for truth on that view. Meanwhile, we're famishing for a cup of tea, eh? The Colonies make a fellow a regular old almshouse woman for tea, don't they? Gee up, lass."

Chatting easily, they came to the top of the hill, crossed a piece of common land, its sole occupant a deserted blacksmith's forge, and turned parallel to the river valley into a road that seemed to switch back and twist and lose itself in a forest of "button" oaks.

Occasionally, as they descended a dip in the road, they caught glimpses of the winding river and the corresponding wooded heights beyond, while on their right, over a vast sea of undulating brown tree-tops, they could see the hazy, bluish outline of the far distant Malvern Hills. Straight ahead there were more hills, and the sun was flashing on the windows of a house, itself invisible.

A mile from the common, at one of the dips in the road, they came unexpectedly upon a pair of old wrought-iron drive gates and a creeper-covered

lodge, evidently vacant, set back in the wood. A drive went curving away among the trees down the hillside, leading to a house, one gable of which could just be seen peeping through an opening in some copper beeches below. Wyer checked the mare, and pointed with his whip.

"That's Seckley Cottage," he explained. "The old dower house, you remember, I spoke about. It is let to a chap called Gautil now."

"Bah!" exclaimed Heron. "He's an infidel."

"Eh? How much?"

"An infidel. How else could he have painted that charming old house like that? It offends my sense of the beautiful. Let us drive on."

"It is rather a daub, I must confess," agreed Wyer, laughingly, "and you're not the only one to gibe at it. Our late bailiff, Pooler, must have opened out his sturdy old soul on the subject of paint in his reports to my governor, for his lordship is considerably touchy about it, I can tell you. It's rather fortunate, all things considered, for the peace of this quiet locality, that my governor prefers his Irish place. He doesn't cotton to his tenant at Seckley Cottage, judging by his letters to me; and I believe he has laid it on pretty stiffish in the letters he has favoured Gautil with. And

if they met, my governor would—well, his pen isn't a patch on his tongue for vitriol."

"And Gautil?" inquired Heron.

"Can't speak for him," said Wyer, "for I haven't yet made the gentleman's acquaintance. He's away on business somewhere."

"Oh! what is he?"

Wyer laughed. "Hanged if I know," he replied; "a financier of sorts, I believe."

"A wide term, eh?"

"I suppose it is. Anyway, he's found the oof-bird's nest—rakes in plenty of shekels from somewhere. He has spent a mint of money on the place. I can't think why he keeps the lodge empty, though. I don't think he is 'retired,' for I understand he has an office somewhere in London, and a town house, too, though the family live here mostly."

"He has a family, then?"

"Yes. A wife and daughter, and jolly decent people they are. But you'll meet them, I hope; that is, if you care to."

"By all means," returned Heron. "I feel rather interested in the Gautils. An unusual name. Not English, surely?"

"Couldn't say," replied Wyer indifferently, "though Mrs. Gautil strikes me as being foreign;

French, for a guess. But I'm no judge. Celes—I mean, Miss Gautil—seems English enough."

Heron repressed a smile. "Ah," he remarked, "and Miss Gautil, what is she like?"

"Unsophisticated," Wyer replied; "absolutely unsophisticated."

He spoke slowly, as though he were chary of letting such a long word slip from his tongue. Perhaps he was not quite sure of its exact meaning, despite his Eton and Oxford education. But evidently the adjective was meant as a compliment to Miss Gautil; and after a covert glance at his friend's face, George Heron deemed it expedient to ask no further questions about her.

One of the chief reasons why Trevor Wyer had taken a fancy to Heron lay in the elder man's habit of being tactfully silent, intuitively knowing when questions would be unwelcome. Nothing repels a youth so much as an elder who shows his interest by a persistent shower of questions.

"Jiminy! What luck!" exclaimed Wyer suddenly. "I believe here they are."

As he spoke, round a bend in the road, to the accompaniment of jingling harness bells, trotted a pair of diminutive Shetland ponies drawing a low phaeton occupied by two ladies, one of whom was driving.

By way of an invitation, Wyer pulled the mare to one side of the road and stopped, taking off his hat with a gay flourish. When abreast of the dog-cart the phaeton stopped also, and Wyer exchanged greetings with its occupants.

"I'm so glad we met," he said eagerly. "Let me take the opportunity of introducing my friend Mr. Heron—Mrs. Gautil—Miss Gautil."

George Heron gave a start, as if his thoughts had been elsewhere; then he raised his hat, inclining his head with grave courtesy towards each lady in turn.

Ever since the phaeton had drawn near, his gaze had been riveted upon the face of the girl holding the reins. Becoming aware of this, Miss Gautil raised her eyebrows slightly, then flushed a little and turned her head away.

"Will you bring Mr. Heron to see us?" Mrs. Gautil inquired of Wyer. "Shall we say, dinner, to-morrow at eight?"

Wyer's acceptances were somewhat disjointed. Primrose, impatient to regain the stable, claimed most of his attention. A little nervously, Mrs. Gautil made the suggestion that it would be advisable to drive on.

"What a good-looking man!" that lady remarked a little later.

"Do you think so?" replied Celeste. "He reminds me of what I imagine a Red Indian to be—that is, if he were clean-shaven. Did you notice how savagely he glared at me? I think he could be awfully cruel. His eyes are horrid."

"Did he stare?" inquired her mother mildly. "I did not notice. I expect you fancied it, dear. Mr. Heron seems reserved — perhaps a little stern; but I rather liked him; he looks so distinguished!"

Mrs. Gautil was a lady who passed through life trying to "rather like" people, and, as a result, people in their turn found her very easy to get on with; some, notably the occupants of the picturesque though shockingly insanitary cottages of Seckley village, used Mrs. Gautil's Christian virtue as a highroad to imposition. But then the cottagers regarded the Gautils as foreigners, and since the foreigners were rich, they were lawfully to be despoiled.

For some time after the carriages had separated Wyer was preoccupied. He had noticed Celeste Gautil's slight flush and turn of the head, and he was now puzzling his brains to find the cause, for with youthful arrogance he attributed the girl's attitude to being in some way connected with himself.

George Heron, also, seemed disinclined for speech. He, too, was thinking of Celeste Gautil, not on account of the natural signs of embarrassment or displeasure she had evinced, for he was fully aware that they had been provoked by his unconsciously prolonged stare, but because at the very first glance at her face he had been reminded, as in a flash, of a man he had known well nearly twenty years ago, a man whom others might have labelled "pretty"—a man whom George Heron desired to meet again more than he desired anything on earth.

He had lost the resemblance when the girl came nearer and he saw her eyes, and he had stared, vainly trying to recover it; but it had gone. Yet he had seen the resemblance, he was positive; it was unmistakable.

George Heron's eyes were fixed straight ahead of him, but he saw nothing of the trees and the distant hills. What he did see, or what he was thinking about, could not have been pleasant; and had Mrs. Gautil seen his face at that moment she would have been forced to agree with her daughter. Heron's face was not merely "horrid," it was the face of a fiend.

Glancing down, Wyer happened to notice his companion's hands, tightly clenched and pressing

on the rug covering their knees; and he was struck by the abnormal development of the muscles between the thumbs and forefingers.

"Gad!" Wyer ejaculated. "I shouldn't like to come to grips with you; and I'm no chicken, either."

The joking remark broke the spell. Heron turned towards Wyer with a pleasant smile. The change was instantaneous; almost beyond belief. "What made you say that?" he asked.

"Your 'bunch of fives,'" replied Wyer slangily. "They're like a prize-fighter's, or a Jap dentist-man's. You must have a tremendous grip."

"Tolerable," agreed Heron complacently. "And, since you mention it, I did once pull a man's tooth out, a double one, with my finger and thumb —like that." He suited the action to the word.

"Great Smoke!" exclaimed Wyer. "Yanked his tooth out! Why?"

"He annoyed me," said Heron, with a grim laugh.

Wyer whistled. "Poor wretch!" he remarked. "I say, I must get that yarn out of you. You never told me that one."

Heron laughed again, and changed the subject abruptly. "How like her mother Miss Gautil is," he observed mendaciously.

"Got the same eyes," returned Wyer, flicking the mare on the shoulder with the whip. "See that horse-fly? But otherwise I don't think so. As a matter of fact, though I haven't seen him, she's supposed to feature her pa (as the yokels say round here) when he was young."

"He must have been a remarkably good-looking man. Is that Janesford Hall I see down there?" Heron inquired with sudden interest.

"Yes, that's the old place," replied Wyer affectionately. "Looks rather a lordly pile from here, doesn't it? But I'm afraid it's little better than a glorified farmhouse, as things are at present. Heigho! what a thing it is to be poor.

"Thank heaven, though, I'm not proud, or I'd have thought twice before asking you to come down. I warned you it would be like eating a halfpenny bun in dress-clothes at the Savoy. Get along now, Primrose! I want my tea, even if you don't."

They dropped at a smart pace down the sunlit road, and presently, leaving the forest land behind them, came into more open country and to the level. Here the road crossed a small stream and ran along the river bank, bounding an extensive flat meadow belonging to the home farm.

A quarter of a mile farther on, the meadow was

intersected by an avenue of tall elms leading to Janesford Hall. The mansion itself stood on an artificially made plateau on the slope of a thickly wooded hill, round the foot of which road and river curved until lost to sight, apparently blocked by a red sandstone bluff rising sharply on the opposite bank.

Beyond the avenue the meadow became park; but a herd of white-faced, straight-backed Herefords indicated that the land was no longer merely ornamental.

Janesford Hall, though set in a position of exceptional beauty, exhibited all the signs of departed affluence. The big, iron-studded doors of the main staircase, Gothic arched, were shut tight and barred.

Even with the sunlight slanting across its front, the mansion looked forlorn and needy, and the occupied wing, with its open windows and attempt at cheerfulness, only seemed to emphasise the appearance of apathy suggested by the rest of the building. Wyer drove the dog-cart into a courtyard, and gave the mare into the charge of a stable lad who came running out munching his jaws as though he had been interrupted at a meal; then, after giving instructions about the kit-bag, Wyer led the way through a shrubbery towards the Hall.

Striding up a flight of stone steps, he flung open a church-like, ancient door in a little porchway, and held out his hand to his guest.

"Welcome to Janesford!"

The words rang true. In spite of his rough life for the past six years, in spite of what Lord Janesford called his son's democratic nonsense, his love of manual labour, his habitual slang, and his almost boyish disregard of convention, Wyer momentarily assumed a dignity that was perfectly natural.

It was as if he were carrying on unconsciously a tradition handed down through a long line of ancestors, that the formal words of welcome must be uttered—even at a side entrance.

His guest responded in an apt sentence, his manner perfectly in accord with that of his host.

Nevertheless, during the next few hours George Heron experienced disappointment many times over. His young host's attitude towards him and his engaging frankness would have gratified the most churlish of guests.

Janesford Hall was set in a veritable bower of loveliness, to whose charms a man less susceptible to nature's beauty than Heron must have succumbed; but George Heron had expected more.

Although, on board the *Orassa*, Wyer had been quite open on the subject of his life and his own lack of this world's goods, he never discussed the poverty-stricken condition of his father's property, beyond, perhaps, a jocular allusion to which no one gave any attention.

And George Heron, in paying a visit to Janesford Hall, had expected at the least to find that mansion stocked with the objects of historical interest and value with which an old family is wont to beautify its ancestral home.

Janesford Hall certainly possessed objects of historical interest and value; but except with the aid of an army of carpenters and furniture vans, they could hardly be removed.

When he had retired to his bedroom for the night, George Heron pondered not a little grimly over this fact. He fingered the bed-linen, and acknowledged that its texture was of the finest; he glanced round the room at the furniture, at the panelling on walls and ceiling, and he saw that both were of oak, carved, for the most part, and black, polished by the labour of years.

Other rooms through which he had been conducted by his host on a round of inspection, though marred by the inevitable dreary dust-sheets, had given the same impression; everything was ancient,

good, solid, and valuable—but, for Heron's purpose, immovable.

For instance, there should have been cabinets containing costly gems of the potter's art; the cabinets were there—but, empty. Even the spacious drawing-rooms were dismantled, their walls bare; and they were devoid of a single knick-knack.

It came as a surprise to George Heron to learn that the mansion had remained empty for years, until Trevor Wyer came home to act as his father's bailiff.

As for the plate used at dinner, it was modern and of no value; purchased, in all probability, quite recently for Wyer's use.

There was one exception. In the long gallery, hung with portraits of departed Wyers, Janesfords, and their dames, George Heron had noticed an oil painting of a lady in rich, brocaded Court dress, with one hand pressed as if to display the beauty of its proportions against her bosom.

The painting was worthy of further consideration; possibly a Romney, this observant guest thought; and, if so, the "little Dutchman" might make some use of it through his American agency.

But it was a trifle; and, at all events, the portrait should remain in its accustomed place un-

disturbed for the present. The library might offer a field for enterprise; but . . .

Heron gave a short laugh like a man self-convicted, good-humouredly enough, of coming on a fool's errand. But he had no intention of unduly cutting short his visit because of his disappointment. He would stay three days as he had arranged. It would not be difficult to get an invitation for a second visit if one proved desirable.

Janesford Hall had drawn blank; there still remained possible compensation—Seckley Cottage, the home of Gautil the wealthy, the collector. That invitation to dinner was lucky. Ah!—Gautil!

"Who was this Gautil?"

George Heron became thoughtful as he asked himself the question. He had asked it a hundred times since meeting Gautil's daughter.

He poured out a glass of whiskey and water which had been hospitably placed upon an old gate-leg table by his bedside; then, having lighted a cigar, he blew out the candles and went towards the open window.

Sitting there on a wide box-seat, and gazing out into the moonlight over the long, interlaced shadows of the tall elms in the avenue to the river winding like a ribbon of silver up the valley, Heron

reconstructed in his mind all that he had been able to glean from his young host about the tenants of Seckley Cottage.

It was not much; and the source of Wyer's information was very evident. But it must have been interesting, unaccountably interesting, to keep this stranger from his bed, thinking and thinking, until the moon herself paled in the first flush of dawn.

And yet, what did the information amount to?

The Gautils, Wyer had said, possessed another house in London in Brantworth Square; but it was only occupied for a few months in the winter.

They lived quietly, their wealth notwithstanding; they attended no big functions, and apparently had no social aspirations. At their town house they did not entertain. Sebastien Gautil, the father, was adamant thereon; at Seckley Cottage he allowed his wife and daughter to follow their inclinations, which, in such an isolated spot, did not give them much scope, had they wished it, even.

Mrs. Gautil gave freely, but quietly, in charity; but she shrank from playing the Lady Bountiful, or that objectionable rôle, the "nouveau-riche" squiress. In fact, she was a "jolly decent sort of woman."

She had been educated at a Roman Catholic institution in Cape Colony; her parents (French, Wyer fancied) had been massacred in a native rising by their own black servants. At the age of seventeen she had married Gautil in Cape Town, and when, after a year, Celeste, their daughter, was born, the family had left South Africa and sailed for England.

For many years they had lived quietly in London, apparently, with frequent changes of residence; then Gautil had bought the house in Brantworth Square, and, finally, not quite two years ago, he had obtained a long lease of Seckley Cottage.

He intended selling the town house, and, no doubt, was about to retire from business—whatever that might be; Wyer did not know; and his informant had seemed equally vague; though she thought that her father had a "musty old office" somewhere in the City.

Sebastien Gautil was often away, as he was at present; no one seemed to know quite where he went to; it seemed to be a condition of things accepted without surprise by his family. Evidently Gautil was a silent man, and did not bring his business to his home.

Mrs. Gautil and her daughter spoke of him

with affection. He had a hobby. Sebastien Gautil "collected." At Seckley Cottage there was a room (Wyer called it a "bally museum") filled with all manner of things. Wyer supposed they were valuable, for a retired soldier, Thomas Hatt by name, was employed to keep a watchful eye on the collection; and he slept in a small chamber built into the museum by Gautil.

Wyer had expressed a doubt that Lord Janesford knew of this addition of bricks and mortar.

A young man's reserve in certain matters is invariably transparent. With regard to Celeste Gautil, the Hon. Trevor had been uncommunicative; perhaps the time for confidence was not ripe; perhaps—and Heron remembered Wyer's manner in the little porch—that time would never come. "It did not signify," as Captain Black would have said.

But the meeting with Celeste Gautil was still fresh in George Heron's mind. And had not Wyer told him that the girl was said to resemble her father in his younger days? Probably her mother had fondly made that remark, and she would know.

Ah, that resemblance!

Who was this Gautil?

Dawn was coming in over the woody ridge

behind the sandstone bluff. George Heron stood up, the butt of a cigar, long cold, gripped between his teeth. He gazed at the faint tints of rosy pink streaking the sky, and stretched out his arms with an unconsciously dramatic abandon.

"Is it my luck?" he demanded of the dawn. "Is it—is it?"

CHAPTER III

ROOM NO. 20, AT THE BÊCHE NOIRE

UNTIL the conflagration deservedly put an end to its existence and cleansed Paris of a "sore," the Bêche Noire occupied the whole of one side of the short, blind street called "La Bouteille."

At the end of "the Bottle," leading to a quay by the Seine, a narrow alley ran tunnel-wise under a warehouse which, stretching its dirty, windowless rear walls across "the Bottle," barred further progress to anything requiring more space than pedestrians walking two abreast.

Nominally a café, the Bêche Noire consisted of three houses, of which the ground floor of two had been converted into a restaurant opening on to the pavement, and, at the back, through a wide curtained doorway, into a spacious dancing-hall, which possessed at one end a gallery for "spectators."

The ground floor of the third house was unknown to the patrons of the restaurant proper.

To all appearances the street-door courted no admittance. It possessed no handle; there was no bell, and no amount of knocking on its dingy green panels would have availed, had one thereby sought entrance.

To a certain limited set of persons, however, the "third house" had attractions. For them the obdurate door would open almost directly on to a dim staircase leading past a grille (not unlike a ticket office on a theatre stairway) to a maze of passages on the upper floors of the café, whereon were numerous *cabinets particuliers*.

Silent, unobtrusive, masked, as it were, by the glare of its restaurant and dancing-saloon, the real Bêche Noire offered a highly satisfactory meeting-place for those who required absolute privacy, an attribute which M. Josephs, the proprietor, never failed volubly to assure his patrons they could always rely upon in the "special section" of his establishment.

Monsieur's patrons, certainly, were not in the habit of mentioning even to their intimates their knowledge of the private door, which, after all, to open only required a vigorous push on one panel, whereupon it swung to quickly and silently behind them.

For the most part, frequenters of the *cabinets*

particuliers of the Bêche Noire came and departed singly; and these "single" visitors, it might have been noticed, traversed as far as possible the darker side of "the Bottle," only a few using the more convenient alley from the quay side.

On the night of September 1, 18—, Room No. 20 of the Bêche Noire was occupied by a lady.

It is worthy of note that since June last in that year the lady had supped alone in Room 20 on the first of each month. But only old Louis, the attendant to whom the room was allotted, knew the regularity of the lady's visits.

Now, old Louis had assimilated quite his share of the discretion essential to the staff of the Bêche Noire, and, though he noted the regularity of the lady's visits on the first of each month, he made no comment.

As for M. Josephs, an apartment occupied meant a sum of ten francs, whether the apartment were rented by the Sultan of Zanzibar or a Parisian apache; the fictitious names in the register (kept with considerable ingenuity by the porter at the grille) were quite wasted upon the proprietor, for he entirely disregarded them while at his morning task of running his fat and never over-clean fingers up the money columns.

For the rest, the attendants and the kitchen

staff on the top floor, it was: "Bock for No. 8; No. 11, supper for two, with wine; coffee, cigarettes and cognac for No. 20."

On the evening in September before mentioned, the lady occupying Room No. 20 had reached the coffee and cognac stage, and Louis, with the deftness of long practice, was applying a lighted match to his guest's cigarette.

He did it with extreme care, for he had known occasions when the effect of a well-served meal had been entirely spoilt by the flame of a match ill-applied. Good "waiting" is a mass of trifles, never at an end until the *pourboire* is safely in the trouser pocket.

"What Madame needs is a little society," Louis ventured, with the easy, yet deferential, familiarity of manner that only his kind know how and when to assume.

For a few seconds the lady smoked her cigarette in silence. She was leaning with one elbow on the table, her eyes half-closed, engrossed in her own thoughts.

"Eh? Society!" she murmured suddenly. "No, Louis. I prefer to be alone." It had the semblance of finality.

"Oh! Madame!"

The lady glanced up and found herself smiling

involuntarily at the look of reproach on the old man's face. "Society never comes up to one's expectations," she explained.

"Ah! that is so," he hastened to agree with her. "But, then, life itself is one vast disappointment, Madame. That, if you like, never comes up to one's expectations. Will Madame require anything else?" he added.

"No, Louis, thank you. But do not go. Stay and talk. I am lonely, and I think you amused me the last time I was here."

"Madame condescends." Louis bowed; then stood at attention, waiting for her to continue.

He had a curious, parrot-like habit, when particularly pleased with himself, of blinking his eyes, a trick which gave his face an unforgettable peculiarity.

He was very pleased now, for Louis liked nothing better than to be given the opportunity of airing his views on topics of a somewhat abstruse nature; and on previous occasions he had found in Madame an unusually patient listener.

"What do you expect from life, Louis?" the lady asked, smiling. She was aware of the old man's weakness, and was quite willing to humour him. Indeed, she welcomed his garrulity, as she

would have welcomed anything that might break the train of her own thoughts.

"I!" Louis retorted glibly. "I expect nothing, Madame, except to lose it. A sad and mad business, this life of ours; a burdensome inheritance we cannot refuse; insolvent from the very start. All of us hopelessly in debt to the devil, and there's few can pay the interest, let alone the principal. I, for one, cannot."

He nodded his head like a toy Chinese mandarin, and added, "I was born unlucky, Madame. I can truthfully say I never had one whole happy day in the course of my existence."

"Unlucky!" the lady exclaimed. "Do you, then, believe in luck?"

"All men of sound judgment believe in luck, Madame. Even fools, who attribute their achievements to their own superior intellects, will explain that their failures are caused by ill-luck. I knew a fool, twenty years ago now it is—but I see I tire Madame," he broke off, aggrieved.

The lady sat in a reverie. She also had vivid recollections of twenty years ago, of a man who believed in luck as in a deity, yet a man of intellect, courage, and action. And what had luck brought to him—and to her?—Louis's words had plunged her back into a vortex of gloomy

reflections from which she had hoped to escape, for a while, at any rate.

Her face grew serious and hard, the face of a woman who had endured long years of unsatisfied heart-cravings, who is irreconcilable, fighting against fate, hoping against hope, until the last thread of even that flimsy solace seems on the point of snapping.

To Louis, eyeing her with his usual blank stare, she appeared a middle-aged lady—certainly a lady—once possessing "attractions," but now seemingly bored by life, as he himself was.

Louis, however, found some grains of pleasure in his boredom, for he possessed a sardonic kind of humour which to the malignant is always a source of acute satisfaction.

"Perhaps Madame may find pleasure in watching the dancers," the old waiter suggested presently. On each former occasion, shortly before eleven o'clock, a visit had been paid to the gallery over one end of the dancing-saloon. Then, at five minutes past eleven, came a generous gratuity, followed by the departure of this solitary patron from the Bêche Noire. To-night augured no exception to the rule.

The lady rose from the table, and after arranging a white lace scarf so as partially to conceal

her features, she accepted Louis's guidance along a warren of gloomy passages, until she and her escort arrived on the gallery.

It was unoccupied, and she leaned against the railings at the one corner, letting her gaze roam over the garish scene beneath her.

A dozen or more "couples" were dancing with abandon to the strains of the "Blue Danube," played with unconventional speed by three blue-jowled, jaded-looking Hungarian musicians, who lolled back in their chairs on the dais near a scarlet-curtained doorway.

At the sides of the saloon stood little round, marble-topped tables, at which men and women were smoking and drinking and making merry in their fashion without restraint. The acrid tobacco smoke and minute particles of dust floating upwards rendered breathing uncomfortable.

With a sigh, the lady on the gallery looked at her watch: five minutes past eleven. She turned to go, but at that instant her attention was arrested by two men in evening dress entering the saloon from the restaurant below. One of them glanced up at her casually, and then lowered his eyes. She became rigid, and stared so fixedly in the man's direction that Louis's curiosity was at once aroused.

Full of a well-simulated zeal on her behalf, he shuffled forward.

"M. Josephs, our proprietor," he explained. "The other, the grey-bearded gentleman with the cloak and monocle, I do not know. He has the air of distinction. We do not often get his kind down there, Madame. An English gentleman, perhaps—curious to 'see.'

"They will drink together 'for the good of the house,' and then— No!" he ejaculated, "they are looking for some one. Ah, yes. It is the man in the blue suit sitting alone by the pillar. See! M. Josephs bows and leaves them together." He went on chatting, apparently oblivious of the fact that his companion was not listening. Madame had grown deathly pale, and was gripping the railings tightly. But presently with an effort she managed to regain her self-control.

"Louis!"

"Yes, Madame."

"The gentleman who has just entered—" she broke off suddenly.

"Ah!" Louis murmured, helping her out. "I understand. Madame is already acquainted with Monsieur." The lady made no reply; she appeared hardly to hear him.

"Shall I take a message, Madame?" persisted Louis.

"Oh, I am an old woman!" she muttered to herself almost inaudibly.

"Madame! Fie! Madame is only as old as she looks," said Louis reproachfully. "Come, then! Leave the affair to me. I will myself bring the gentleman to Madame. I will say——"

The lady interrupted him abruptly. "You will say just this," she insisted. "'If you are a believer in luck, come to Number Twenty.' Do you understand?"

"As Madame wishes." With a slight lift of his thin shoulders, Louis led the way back to Room 20.

When the old waiter had departed on his errand, the lady hastened to the table and poured out a glass of liqueur with trembling hands. The spirit revived her somewhat; but she could not subdue her restlessness, and began moving about the room with nervous, uncertain steps.

Approaching one of the mirrors, of which there were many on the gaudily painted walls, she regarded the reflection of her face; but almost immediately she turned wearily away and reseated herself. As she hid her face in her arms on the table, her elbow swept the coffee cup and saucer to the floor.

A knock sounded on the door; a man entered. She did not stir.

The newcomer gave a quick, comprehensive glance round the room, then shut the door and came slowly towards the table.

"Your servant, Madame"—he began. She forced herself to look up. The monocle fell from his eye— "Ah!—it is you, Ninette?"

"Yes, André," she murmured, "it is I, Ninette." She rose unsteadily, and they stood gazing at one another across the table.

"You knew me?" he asked, with a touch of vexation, looking at himself in one of the mirrors, and plucking at his neat grey beard. Her face fell.

"At once," she panted, her breath coming in short, quick gasps. "But, André! What a greeting!—How cold!—My lover!" —

She stretched out her arms beseechingly; then, as he made no move, her arms drooped to her sides, and she sank, almost swooning, into her chair again. Her companion placed his cloak and hat on a chair by the window, and came close to her. His movements were agile and noiseless.

Dropping on one knee, he lifted her hand to his lips. His whole attitude betokened courtesy and respect, whether simulated or sincere it would be

difficult to say; but his touch sent no exultant thrill to her heart. Impulsively she took his head between her hands, and searched anxiously in his eyes. They were cold, with not even a trace of sympathy in them.

"Only my hand?—I have waited—André! do you forget?—Oh! I am old—old—old." She moaned. "I wish I were dead." She covered her face with her hands, and began to sob softly.

He rose and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Ninette," he said, not unkindly, "it was folly to expect the man you once knew and loved. He died when we were parted—and in his place——"

"Stop!—for pity's sake. We are together again," she murmured brokenly; then, clutching his hand, she drew it under her cheek. "I must win you back to life—and love."

"Impossible!" he jerked out, with an abrupt change of tone. "Let go my hand. Don't be foolish."

"Foolish!" She flung his hand from her, and sprang to her feet. "And this is what I have waited for all these years!" she said, in low passionate tones. "Oh! you cannot be human, you—" she broke off, unable to articulate

"Human!" he muttered gloomily. "Yes, in

shape only. You have had your freedom. You cannot conceive the torture of captivity—the brain-surges of insensate fury that sweep away all that is kindly in a man, and flood his whole being with hate—deadly, diabolical hate. I tell you I live for one thing only— Bah! Why go on?" he broke out, in self-contempt for his outburst. "Let us face facts. I have utterly lost the capacity of love for any one."

"Did you come here only to tell me that?" she demanded, with flashing eyes that were as hard as his own. "Or do you wish to offer me thanks for helping you to escape?

"Thanks!—Oh, my God!—If you dare utter a word, I will run into the streets and cry out your presence in Paris, so that the first gendarme shall take you. You shall go back to— Oh!"

She stopped, appalled by the terrible expression of his face. He gripped her wrists and forced her back into her chair. His eyes seemed to hurt her; she shrank from him, quivering.

"Silence!" he commanded. "Do you want every fool in the place to hear you? No, I shall not hurt you, I never struck a woman. Control yourself, and listen to me.

"I came here for two reasons. One does not concern you. The other was because I knew you

would be here, and I did intend to offer you my thanks for all you have done for me. I am incapable of offering you more; I will not offer you less. At least, it is no insult.

"It would be, if I were to pretend a passion that no longer lives. Do you think it is nothing to me, when I remember what we were to each other, that I come back to you, cold, knowing that I am a clod, that every spark of affection for my woman —yes, my woman—has died within me?

"I realise all you have done for me. I know I owe you my liberty. I know you have been faithful to my memory. Bah!"—he released her wrists—"I am in your debt, and I cannot pay. Go and do what you threatened. Tell all the world I have returned to Paris."

A wave of hot colour suffused her cheeks. "André!" she pleaded, half-crying with indignation and humiliation. "I did not mean it. You know I could not. Oh, cruel—cruel!—I had planned—oh, how I had planned!"

Suddenly she started up in her seat.

"You must not stay in Paris," she cried. "I should die if you were taken from me again. Come away with me. We will go to England.—Only let me be near you."

"Hush! Speak lower. No," he went on, "I have work to do."

"Work!"

"You forget I have a profession," with a sneering laugh. "Yes, a profession, for it is as honest as most professions that men make money by. And we want money."

"André!" she interrupted him, "I have money enough for both. Don't——"

"You misunderstand me," he broke in. "There are others."

"Others, André! Whom do you mean?"

"My comrades. Do you not remember there were three of us?"

"They have escaped, too?"

He shrugged his shoulders and seated himself opposite to her. "One is down in the dancing saloon," he said coolly. "I was talking to him when your message came. I expect the other is not far away, if he has had any luck. It was arranged we should meet here to-night. The last I saw of both of them was on board the schooner you sent us. You arranged that affair magnificently," he added, brightening up.

"Money," she replied, with bitter curtness. "But I had no intention of helping those two horrible men. André!" she pleaded, "have no

more to do with them. They will be your ruin. Come away at once, I beg and beseech you." She rose eagerly, with arms outstretched towards him. He raised his hand.

"I am tied to them by a vow," he said—"foolish, if you like; but it is my 'luck,' and it holds me. My one virtuous point!" he sneered. "Besides, they are necessary to me for the matter I have on hand. When that is done we scatter, each for himself."

"But, André!" she begged piteously, "have you no thought for me?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Are we not to be together?"

"Impossible."

"André!" she pleaded, "think of all I have suffered. Think of the years I have spent planning and planning for you; aching for the sight of you. I have grown old—ah! so old!—in your service, and you refuse me this little thing. Let me be near you, so that at least I can see you every day. I will be so cautious. I will never even speak to you if you do not wish it. Ah, you do not know what love means to a woman. André, you cannot refuse. Look me in the face—you cannot."

She went to him and put her hands upon his shoulders. She felt he was wavering.

"No! It would be folly," he muttered. "Rank folly."

She turned away from him, sighing. There was a silence for some moments. Suddenly he looked up and laughed.

"After all, what does it matter?" he exclaimed. "Yes. Have it your own way. I can trust you. It is little enough I can do to repay you. No, do not thank me!"—for she had turned round on him with a joyous face. "Go and sit down and let me think."

He rose, and began pacing the room. The woman went back to her chair and waited in silence for him to speak.

"Where do you live now?" he asked abruptly, coming to a halt near her.

"I have no settled home," she replied. "I sold everything when I went out to Australia to arrange for a vessel to fetch you from—" He held up a warning finger, and she checked herself, adding: "Since I came back I have been living in London; coming to Paris, as I told you in the code I should, so as to be here on the first of each month."

"Yes, your books reached me," he said. Then: "You know many people in London? But, of course"—sneeringly—"I forgot.

You always had a large circle of swell friends."

"André!" she expostulated. "You know I would give them all up for you. I have done so already—" He raised his hand again, interrupting her sharply.

"Have you ever heard of any one called 'Gautil'? He is a financier by repute; he has a big mansion in Brantworth Square, in London, and a place in the country, in Worcestershire, a village called Seckley. There is a Mrs. Gautil, a retiring sort of person, and a young daughter of about seventeen or eighteen."

"No," she replied, "I do not think I ever even heard the name."

"No?" he repeated thoughtfully. "Well, it does not matter. But, if you insist on being near me, get to know the Gautils. Take a cottage at Seckley village, and make friends with the Gautil womenfolk if you like. It would be easy; Mrs. Gautil would welcome it. They spend most of their time in the country. But, remember!" he said sternly, "when we meet again, we are strangers."

"I will remember," she replied wearily.

"Now, go!" he said.

She looked at him dully. "André!" she protested, almost inaudibly.

"I have other matters to attend to."

"But, André? Am I not to have any address?"

"I have no address," he took her up quickly. "You must never write. I am going against my better judgment as it is. Go; before I change my mind."

He stood waiting for her to move, this cold, inscrutable man, who still wielded such power over her. She had laughed at it years ago; but she had been proud to obey him, to be dismissed at his pleasure, when he had other things to do. Was she proud now?—But she must obey him.

She felt suddenly and with a curious alarm that she came near to hating him. The fine balance wavered. It had wavered several times, had she known it, during the last miserable ten minutes.

It was love or hate. There could be no betwixt and between, no equipoise of the scales. And some inexplicable agency—who knows what it is?—pressed on the balance, and Ninette's infatuation for the man weighed down hate. Would it be so always?

With a deep sigh she rose slowly and went towards her outdoor wraps hanging on some pegs on the wall behind her chair. The man hastened to assist her, and it gave her a faint, wistful thrill

of pleasure that he was still outwardly something of the gallant she remembered so well.

The shell was the same. She wondered, too, that this should be so; and afterwards, pondering over this terribly distressing meeting, she tried to persuade herself that there was still a flicker of hope.

"Keep me away from those two dreadful men," she begged, as he put the lace scarf neatly round her throat.

"My comrades?" he replied. "You never actually saw them, did you?" She shuddered.

"I was at the—the trial," she said slowly. "I could not keep away."

"Rest assured you will never meet them again." He laughed unpleasantly. "They were not called 'Invisibles' for nothing. Wait!" he said suddenly. "You knew me at once when I came in. Others may do the same. About this place? I see it has changed hands; Bricquet dead; otherwise it seems much the same as in my time. Is it safe? Is there any one here who might remember me?"

"It was the only place I could suggest," she replied. "I made very cautious inquiries, and found it was conducted in the same way as it used to be. And the Bêche Noire has memories," she added sadly.

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently, "I do not forget. But who is the antique fellow who brought me your message just now?"

"Old Louis!" she whispered in alarm. "I had not given him a thought. André! He tells me he has been here all his life."

He strode to the bell and rang it. "Does Louis know who you are?" he asked, knitting his brows.

"No," she answered, with a curious little shiver. "I fancy he takes me at my face value, a somewhat eccentric woman of the class he often sees here."

He frowned still more heavily. "I never trust a man with a face like a blank piece of parchment," he muttered.

At that moment Louis made his reappearance, and, perceiving signs of departure, vaguely presented Madame's bill.

"Eh!" exclaimed her companion, quickly fixing his monocle in his eye. "That is my affair." He paid the bill, and, telling the old man to wait, went to the door and held it open. Ninette understood that it was the signal for her to go.

"You will not forget," he urged, as she came towards him. "I shall expect you on board my yacht not later than two o'clock the day after to-morrow."

Ninette hesitated, looking at him in surprise.

His face had become animated and his voice eager and full of gaiety. Surely this was the André she had expected, the lover she had so ardently awaited! But a quick, penetrating glance told her that he was only acting a part for the mystification of a senile waiter. She made some inaudible reply; then, veiling her features more completely, she swept quickly from the room.

André closed the door behind her, and turned to Louis, who was picking up the pieces of broken china from the floor.

"You are Louis, are you not?" he inquired, taking a seat at the table and leaning back after the manner of one who has made a good bargain and is pleased with himself and inclined to be affable.

"Yes, M'sieur," replied Louis, straightening his back, as though it behoved him to treat that part of his body with the greatest care and respect.

"I suppose you know how to hold your tongue?"

The old man returned the stranger's bold scrutiny without a flicker of his eyelids. "I learned discretion under Bricquet," he grumbled.

"Bricquet! Who the deuce is Bricquet?"

"The former proprietor; but, of course, Monsieur would not understand. The Bêche Noire,

M'sieur, has a reputation; and I have been here for nearly thirty-five years."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the other indifferently, lighting a cigarette. "Well, you must not be offended because I wish to be cautious. The fact is, I am well known"—he laughed lightly—"and the last thing I want is publicity. Madame and I are old friends, and I am taking her a short cruise in my yacht. You follow me? Those newspaper fellows, you know, they are the deuce and all to elude, eh?" He held out a gold piece.

"Have no fear, M'sieur," said Louis with a bow, as he pocketed the coin.

"Good," observed the donor briskly. "Now for another matter. Did you notice the man I was talking to in the dancing-saloon?"

"Yes, M'sieur."

"The captain of my yacht. Go and fetch him up here, will you? I must give him some orders, and I do not want to be seen down there again. I will pay for the extra use of this room if necessary."

"I think M. Josephs would desire it, M'sieur," Louis said. His attitude and a certain inflection in his voice suggested a regrettable greed on the part of his employer; though, in his mind, Louis at once determined that this second "let" of Room

20 was entirely his own legitimate perquisite. Ten francs! They would clink nicely with the gold piece already in his pocket. As he left the room Louis's eyes blinked even more parrot-like than usual.

Left alone, the stranger ran lightly to the window, and, having pulled aside the heavy curtains, looked down into the street below. On the opposite side an undersized man was moving restlessly to and fro, always keeping well away from the glare cast by the café lights.

After frowning at the slouching figure for several moments, the watcher impatiently replaced the curtains, withdrew from the window, and gave himself up to a close scrutiny of his own reflection in one of the mirrors. He seemed to be not a little uneasy. Presently, hearing the door opened, he swung round to greet a tall man in a blue suit of a nautical cut, who was at that moment entering.

"Ha! Captain Salter," he exclaimed brusquely in English. "Sit down—sit down"—indicating a chair—"I want a few words with you."

The newcomer saluted gravely. "Thank you, my lord," he said, also in English, seating himself. With his sunburnt and lined face, he might have passed muster for the sailor in any company but that of sailors themselves, who, after their kind,

would have discovered in him a sham, if only by the unsailor-like restlessness of his hands and eyes.

Louis, after ushering in this individual, had effaced himself.

"Go back to the yacht at once," "my lord" went on, in loud tones. "Be ready to sail by two o'clock the day after to-morrow. And here! before you go, just look through this list and tell me if there is anything to add to it."

As he spoke he produced from his pocket a folded piece of paper, and, sitting by the side of "Captain Salter," he opened it out upon the table in front of them. The two men appeared to examine the paper with care.

"Go on talking loud," "my lord" whispered. "I don't trust the old waiter. It's possible he understands English, and may be listening outside."

"Yes; I recognised him—Louis," the "Captain" murmured; then, taking his cue quickly, he began out loud to comment on a totally imaginary list, ticking off each item, as it were, with a forefinger.

"Jean is below in the street," the other went on in a barely audible voice. "Take him to 19, Caveen Street, West India Dockroad, London. Ask for Captain Petersen when you get there"—he repeated the address and the name twice.

"This place is not safe. We must all be out of Paris to-night."

"Money," muttered his confederate tersely.

The deficiency was at once made good, the transaction covered by a clearly spoken explanation, natural enough as between a yacht owner and his captain; then Louis was summoned and told to escort "Captain Salter" down to the café again and return with the bill.

When the old waiter once more entered the room No. 20 was unoccupied. The stranger, "my lord"—or whoever he might be—had gone.

Louis scowled; then an idea striking him, he hurried to the window. He was just in time to see "Captain Salter's" tall form cross the street and merge into the shadows on the opposite side. A moment or two later Louis saw him and another, a much smaller man, walk swiftly down "the Bottle" towards the alley under Gronnet's warehouse.

There was no sign of "my lord"; but, on clearing the table, Louis discovered five francs, and scowled again as he pocketed the half of what he had expected as his due. He felt he had been defrauded.

In the early hours of the morning Louis dragged himself up the stairs to the garret where he slept.

Tired in body as the old man was, his brain worked with unceasing activity.

Before undressing himself the old waiter extracted a bundle of newspaper cuttings from an ancient and battered box, and placing them upon the bed, searched through them carefully. For the most part they were police records, plentifully illustrated with portraits of criminals, and imaginary, suggestive pictures of the deeds of evil-doers.

Louis had his own reasons for the study of such "literature," reasons which not seldom were connected with pecuniary profit to himself. In England we have our Louis. We call him a "police-nark"; that is, if we are cognisant of such "low class" phraseology.

But to return to Louis's garret. Let us play the spy and listen to the old man muttering as he bends over his pile of age-yellowed and discoloured newspaper cuttings strewn about the patchwork coverlet of his bed, with the candle almost singeing what scanty grizzled hairs Time has left to him.

"English?" he asks himself. "Milor?—perhaps. But the other!—Captain of Milor's yacht—Bah! Tell that to the pigs—I know his face—I know it, I tell you. Fool! think!

think!—And there was another who waited outside in 'the Bottle'—Idiot! Imbecile! You ought to be in your coffin—old fool!—And Madame—who is only as old as she looks—ha, ha! —*Sacré!*"

Suddenly his attention becomes fixed. He is glaring at the badly executed portraits of four men in a paper printed just twenty years ago. Beneath the "portraits," in faded type is an explanation which, briefly put, reads as follows:—

THE INVISIBLES.—(1) André Gaspard, (2) Kit Polliter, (3) Jean (the "Rat"), deported for life to New Caledonia; (4) Hippolyte Courtois, who joined the gang in order to betray them and to claim the reward offered for information leading to their capture.

"Deuce take Milor's beard!" ejaculates old Louis piously.

We leave the old waiter scowling at the portrait of André Gaspard and covering the lower half of the face with trembling fingers.

CHAPTER IV

AT NO. 19, CAVEEN STREET

LAGGING behind the main stream of passengers, who had alighted from the train already some distance on its way to Poplar and the terminus at Blackwell, two men slowly descended the stairs from the West India Dock Station to the street, and dawdled towards the big dock gates.

One of the men, had he held himself erect, stood above the average height; the other was a puny but aggressive-looking fellow. Both had the appearance of forecastle hands of the rougher sort in shore-going rig.

Opposite the Jamaica, they halted, as though discussing the advisability of partaking of that last highly desirable drink before entering upon a period of enforced abstinence upon the high seas.

From the shelter at the dock gates, a burly policeman watched them with indifference—indifference, first, because there was no likelihood of

his being invited to join in a farewell toast; and, second, because he had seen the little comedy enacted before, a thousand times.

He merely conjectured, from habit, what vessel the twain were joining, and if, with them, it would be a case of a "pier-head jump" at the last possible moment.

The consumption of "last drinks," the policeman knew, not seldom entails an inordinate length of time. Apparently, the two men opposite the Jamaica decided to bestow their patronage elsewhere.

After some hesitation they turned, hurried back up the West India Dock-road, and disappeared round a corner into Caveen Street. Whereupon, in all probability the policeman forgot all about them, and so missed the chance of his lifetime, for the taller of the two seafaring-looking men was Kit Polliter, alias (two days ago) "Captain Salter," alias (in past years) a host of other names equally fictitious; the puny little fellow was Jean, who, so far as this story is concerned, had neither surname nor alias, unless "the Rat" may be allowed to serve for both.

At No. 19, Caveen Street, Polliter and Jean stopped; and having, not without difficulty, made sure of the number on the dirt-begrimed fanlight

over the door, Polliter rapped a cautious tattoo with the knocker.

Presently the door opened with a crack, and an elderly woman with a hard, uncompromising visage, peered out. Her immediate attempt to bang the door to again was anticipated by a deftly inserted boot.

"Wot 'jer want?" she then demanded sullenly.

"Captain Petersen," Polliter replied, with an ingratiating smile.

Evidently mollified by the name of Petersen, but with a bad grace, the woman admitted them without further demur.

"He's upstairs," she grumbled; "top landin'. There's only two rooms, and his is the fust you comes to. Find yer way yerselves. I've enough trapesin' up them stairs as it is. And wipe yer feet," she added truculently, eyeing their boots with disfavour.

She stood at the bottom of the staircase watching their progress upwards; then, as they disappeared upon the first landing, she gave a loud sniff and went slip-slopping along the narrow passage to those mysterious regions termed generally "the back."

Polliter and Jean found Captain Petersen's room without difficulty, and the former knocked

with a curious, staccato effect upon the door. Instantly a deep voice from within bade them "Come in."

The apartment they entered—like the landlady—was uncompromising. One wondered if in all the world there could be a single person who would be willing to pay for the privilege of occupying such a garret one shilling a day—a crown, perhaps, if taken by the week.

The appointments consisted of a bed, with a broken back and sagging, almost to the floor, in one corner; a small "lino"-covered table, propped of necessity against the wall; a rickety washstand, bearing chipped enamelled-tin utensils; and one chair, whose age and limitations were obvious.

"Captain Petersen," a stoutish, black-bearded individual, reclined, fully dressed, upon the bed. From his lips protruded a long, venomous-looking cheroot extracted from a "250" box which rested within easy reach upon the washstand. One hand hung down by the side of the bed, gripping a newspaper with the thumb, the muscles of which were extraordinarily developed.

Through a haze of cigar smoke made by several recent vigorous puffs, Captain Petersen peered searchingly at his visitors.

For a moment Polliter returned the gaze with

equal intentness; then he nodded reassuringly. But Jean found recognition more difficult.

"Guv'nor?" he began hesitatingly.

Petersen cut him short. "My name is 'Captain Petersen,'" he rapped out. "And once and for all, Jean," he added, frowning at the little man, "forget that mode of speech. The clock has been put back twenty years. If you cannot bear that in mind—" He pointed significantly towards the door.

Jean grinned. "I see it's you, right enough, now," he rejoined; "but I wanted to make sure. You needn't be afraid of me giving you or myself away. Put me in good clothes and I'll talk up to them with either of you. I've not forgotten I was once a 'high-flyer'—nor my English—nor anything." He checked himself and gave a little wriggle, uneasy under the stony gaze of the man upon the bed.

Petersen indicated the box of cheroots with an abrupt gesture. Polliter, who, from the moment he entered the room, seemed to have put on an air of refinement quite out of keeping with his rough garb, uttered conventional thanks, and having lit his cheroot, moved to the foot of the bed and leaned with his arms upon the rail.

Jean said nothing, but helped himself as if it

were only his right; then he appropriated the chair, tilting it against the wall, balanced precariously upon its two creaking back legs. For some minutes the three men smoked in silence.

"Before we begin to discuss anything at all," Petersen began at last, in quiet tones, "let us have a clear understanding. Am I leader—absolutely—without question?"

Polliter gravely inclined his head. Jean jerked the front legs of his chair down to the floor and slewed round towards the bed.

"You know that without being told," he replied with exasperation. "Haven't we proved it? What else are we?—Oh! curse it!" he broke off—"You find out where he is, and let me get at him, and I'll go down on my knees and lick your boots, if you want it."

"Indeed! And what will you do to—er—him, when you do meet him?" Petersen inquired gently.

The little man stared in amazement. "Do?" he snarled.

"Ah!" Petersen interrupted him. "You need not go on. You would give him a moment's pain, and then—oblivion.

"And we! We have suffered torture for twenty years. You are a fool, Jean; so kindly keep your folly to yourself, and be silent.

"For the last time, I give you my word that we shall find him. And, if I can prevent it, our man will not have the joy of dying—until we permit. But meanwhile," he continued, with a crisp change of tone, "we can do nothing without funds. I for one have no intention of existing in this sort of dog-hole. And it will not be necessary.

"Before I go into that, however, have either of you anything to tell me? Have you the slightest suspicion that you are 'marked' by any one?"

Polliter took his cheroot from his mouth and answered at once.

"No. This is my itinerary. Acting on your suggestion, I came by way of the 'States'—fo'c'stle hand from Sydney to Yokohama—in the glory-hole (as a flunkey) in another steamer to 'Frisco. There I worked on the wharf until I could buy myself a decent rig-out; then I got a job drumming pictures and books.

"My old knowledge in matters artistic proved useful, even in cheap lines. I was surprised. When I had made enough dollars I threw up my job and railed across to New York. Cattle-hand to Liverpool.

"Then, as I had run things rather fine, I thought I was justified in using up the 'stand-by' money you gave me in Sydney to enable me to reach Paris

for the time arranged. From Paris," he added colourlessly, "Jean and I got here without a sign of danger. I thought a change of clothing advisable; the others we dropped overboard just before reaching Dover. That is all, unless you want details."

"Not now," Petersen replied, adding: "In the future, remember, eliminate all slang from your vocabulary, except such as you find customary among refined people.

"Your rôle—it was once natural to you—is that of a quiet and unassuming gentleman with modest means. Endeavour to bring the special knowledge you possessed formerly as a connoisseur up to date. . . . I am waiting," Petersen went on sharply, after a pause, turning to Jean. "Have you nothing to tell me?"

"Yes—plenty," the little man rejoined, with the assertiveness of one who half expects his statements to be questioned; then: "I went from Sydney to Brisbane, as you told me to. There—I'm not afraid to say it—well, I'd got the money you gave me; and I had twenty years to make up for——"

"Leave that out," Petersen put in grimly. "I knew perfectly well what would occur. Go on."

"In about a week," Jean resumed, grinning, "I

was on the beach. Not that I couldn't have lived easy, if I hadn't promised I'd run no risks. Well, I had to get out of Brisbane, and, as I couldn't get a job on the square, I stowed away in a French barque bound for Havre. There's a bo'sun aboard her I'll get even with one day—because he thought I was English, he——"

"We are not concerned with boatswains of barques. Go on."

"I slipped the barque at Havre, and walked to Paris. I hadn't forgotten the date I was to be there." Jean paused and blew noisily upon his cheroot to revive it.

"Why did you stay outside in La Bouteille instead of waiting in the dancing-saloon, as I ordered?" Petersen demanded.

The little man put on a perky expression; he had expected the question. "Because I wasn't a fool," he retorted.

"You listen. I didn't go straight to Paris from Havre; I went roundabout, because I'd got plenty of time, and Paris is risky. I always told you so.

"Well, the Sunday before I got there, I was sitting outside an inn at Marleon-sur-Seine, when an old man called to see the proprietor. I seemed to know his face and his voice. It bothered me, and I determined to find out who he was.

"He went away towards evening, and I made friends with the proprietor and got the fool drunk. He told me the old man's name was George Martel, and he wanted to take over the inn, but wouldn't give the price. At the time I thought no more about it.

"I got to the Bêche Noire just before eleven on the night arranged, and I went straight in; but before entering the dancing-saloon I had sense enough to pull aside the curtain and look in. I saw him"—jerking his head in Polliter's direction—"and I saw George Martel, too, standing in the gallery with a woman. But it wasn't George Martel—it was Louis! And Louis would remember me, hang him!

"I got outside again, quick. And we're lucky if Louis didn't remember you clever two," he ended up with surly insolence.

"We need not worry about Louis," Polliter observed. "The man I fear is Captain Black."

"I trust Black implicitly," Petersen said with emphasis. "We can leave him out of our calculations."

"And if you've any doubts about Louis," Jean put in jauntily, "I'll wipe him off the slate, too." His words might have been construed in two ways; and, had his companions noticed the

extraordinary malignant look of satisfaction that came into his face, they must have been struck by the double meaning. As it was, they appeared to miss it entirely.

Petersen sat upright, and abruptly changed the subject. "To business!" he said briskly. "We start again where we left off twenty years ago. We work under the rules I laid down during our fortnight in the schooner. Do you remember them?"

"Yes," the others answered without hesitation.

"I arrange," Petersen went on; "you carry out. Between each achievement you live upon your shares of the proceeds—separately—not attempting to find out where the other is.

"And, remember, you will live as gentlemen, forgetting the unnatural and uncouth manners and mode of speech which, I regret, you both fell into when we were away from civilisation.

"Our meeting-place: the steps of the British Museum. Time: noon precisely, upon the days which you will see announced from time to time in the personal column of the *Morning Post*, Recognition signal: the old one; it cannot be bettered. Is all quite clear?"

"Who arranged about the schooner?" Jean asked.

"A friend."

"Who provided the money you got in Sydney?"

"The same friend placed it in a bank for the use of John Andrews."

"Man or woman?"

Petersen's eyes narrowed. "Woman," he replied, in a tone which should have carried its warning. But Jean had got a little out of hand.

"Um," he sneered. No word or phrase could have been more expressive.

Petersen threw away a half-smoked cheroot, and, getting slowly off the bed, stood over Jean.

"It is perhaps as well," he began dispassionately, "that the opportunity occurs at the outset. In spite of my lessons in the schooner and, a few minutes ago, your own acquiescence in the fact, you do not yet realise that we have reverted to our former relationship in every detail."

As he uttered the last three words, Petersen seized Jean by the coat collar and proceeded to drub him with the precision and mercilessness of a schoolboy bully, planting each blow where it would hurt most, yet outwardly show no mark.

There was no commotion. Jean offered no resistance and made no outcry; and, when released, he evinced no resentment. He merely shook himself, like a well-trained dog that has been beaten

by its master, stood still, grinning broadly, for a moment; then he chose another cheroot, lit it, and resumed his seat. So far as he was concerned, there was no doubt that the incident had closed and would be forgotten.

Petersen returned to the bed. "You, Kit—any questions?" he demanded. His manner towards Polliter, though somewhat stern, had none of the barely concealed grimness he adopted when dealing with Jean.

Polliter chewed at his cheroot stump. Throughout the interview, except for a certain nervous restlessness of hands and eyes, he had hardly varied his position.

"Only this," he said presently. "When we have completed an affair, to whom are we to take the proceeds—that is, of course, if the proceeds need to be converted into cash?"

"Van Langenberg," Petersen replied.

Polliter stared at him. "What! The little Dutchman?" he jerked out. "Heugh! but he's a back number."

"Do you remember my words as we lay awake in the cave waiting for dawn?" Petersen asked.

"By—!" Polliter burst out. "You've found him! But he's never—" he broke off, adding, with good-humoured impatience; "Oh! go on.

Tell us what we are to know. I'm your dog. I'm dumb—as I told you in that deuced cave."

"I have found Van Langenberg," Petersen said quietly. "It was a matter of luck. As for him, he has been successful; he scorns even to change his name. Let that pass."

"Van Langenberg will buy anything from us I take to him," continued Petersen. "Later, we will cut the little bantam cock's comb—or wring his neck."

Jean sniggered.

"I think he may become dangerous. And because of that, you and Jean will forget his very existence. I alone, for the present, come into contact with him. But we are wasting time," he continued, putting his hand into his coat pocket and bringing out two cyclist's maps, which he tossed to his companions.

"Follow closely on those while I give you your instructions, from which neither of you will depart in the slightest detail. The day fixed for action is Thursday next. Kit, your route:

"Eight A. M. train from Paddington. Arrive Bridgnorth soon after noon. Have you found that place on the map? Good.

"Follow the River Severn down-stream on the right bank until you reach the ferry above the

village of Seckley. Turn up the road crossing the railway near Ardley Station, past a deserted blacksmith's forge on a common, bear to your left until you come to gates and a lodge and a drive leading down into the woods. The scale of miles is on the map.

"Time yourself to be at those lodge gates at 9.30 P.M. on Thursday. Conceal yourself a short distance down the drive. Soon after 10 P.M. a carriage will pass you and proceed towards Ardley Station.

"Probably a large hound will accompany the carriage; if not, be prepared—listen, Jean—to encounter the animal later. I suggest the noose method I invented in former years, so obtain the necessary cord and short staff.

"As soon as the carriage has gone, follow the drive until you see a house. Circle round it, and go quickly down across the edge of two terraced lawns, through an orchard, then across a meadow to the river, where you will come upon a boathouse.

"You will arrive at the boathouse not a second later than 10.20 P.M. But if you see no carriage you will regard its absence as a sign that all arrangements are cancelled, and you will efface yourself from the neighbourhood. And be sure to watch your newspaper for communication from me."

Petersen turned to the little man. "Jean, your route:

"Thursday next; 9.15 A.M. train from Paddington. Arrive Worcester 12.30. Proceed to the river; do not cross it. Walk straight up-stream until you reach Beaudelay. There you will cross by the bridge. Go on up until you come upon a boathouse with concrete steps to the water. Conceal yourself in the woods until sixteen minutes past ten, when you will again be at the boathouse.

"You will wait five minutes—Kit, that allows you one minute's grace—Jean, if Kit does not put in an appearance you will regard all arrangements as cancelled, and you will efface yourself from the neighbourhood. And be sure to watch your newspaper for communciation from me.

"Listen! both of you," Petersen continued, closing his eyes. "On meeting, Kit at once leads the way back to the house. Here, Jean leads. Exactly at 10.30 P.M. you enter by the conservatory door which opens on the upper lawn and faces the river. It is at the centre of that side of the house.

"Pass through the conservatory, through the large inner glass door, into the hall. Take the arched, curtained entrance to the passage beneath

the staircase on your right; it leads, I may say, to the domestic offices.

"Enter the first door on your left into a small room, thence through the inner door to your destination. Here, you may use a light. Kit, for the purpose, purchase something suitable.

"Jean, Kit now resumes the lead: you will obey him. Kit, you will choose what is to be taken and what left; and you will see to it that you leave no trace of your presence, inside or outside the house. Jean will re-lock what he has unlocked. You will be out of the house by 11 P.M. You will take the proceeds down to the river; turn to the right, until you come to a steep, wooded hillside where there are innumerable facilities for concealing your burden. Then you will separate.

"Jean, your part in the affair will now be concluded until we share profits.

"Kit, on the following Saturday you will hire a pleasure boat at Worcester for the week-end. You will proceed up-stream. At midnight, recover the goods; return; pass below Worcester; pass through Diglis Lock; and two miles beyond, at 3 P.M. on Sunday, you will meet me in a canoe.

"Your part in the affair will now be concluded, until we share profits."

Petersen paused, as though awaiting comments. Receiving none, he opened his eyes and repeated his instructions almost word for word. Then, just as Jean was about to speak, he put his hand beneath the pillow and brought out a small, neat wash-leather roll about a foot long.

"You will find all you need in here," Petersen remarked. "I hope you have not forgotten how to use them."

"Forgotten!" Jean's rat-like face became contemptuously indignant. He snatched the roll from Petersen's hand, and, dropping to his knees upon the floor, hurriedly unfastened the clasps. In another second he was gloating over an array of curiously shaped tools of dull, hardened steel, and exquisite finish.

His supple fingers lifted, balanced, and put aside the tools one by one; then, choosing two of them, he sprang to his feet and dashed to the door. He seemed to glide rather than run, and his heavy boots made but the slightest noise. With his hand on the key, Jean faced round, his chin peaked forward. It was easy to understand why Jean had been nicknamed "the Rat."

"Forgotten!" he jeered. "Lock me out, and turn your faces away and talk, and see if I've forgotten."

Before they could reply he opened the door just wide enough for his meagre body to pass through, and slunk out on the landing, closing the door silently behind him.

Petersen nodded to Polliter, who crossed the room, turned the key, and came back to the bed. Like children playing a game, the two men remaining in the room gravely averted their heads away from the door, and Petersen began to speak quickly in low tones. He regarded the situation created by Jean as opportune.

"Kit," Petersen almost whispered, "what are your real feelings towards him—Courtois?"

Polliter started. "Straight, Andy?" he murmured.

Petersen nodded.

"Hanged if I know, now I'm back to civilisation. Anyway, it seems to me it will be better for us if we don't find him. Because, when that happens, we separate; and I'd like to make enough to retire altogether and live quietly, first. I shan't cry if we don't find him."

"I thought so," Petersen replied. "You're soft—always were at heart. But you will stand by me whatever happens?"

"I haven't forgotten 'all or none' on that deuced beach, Andy."

"Listen, Kit. If you should meet and recognise Courtois, say nothing to Jean."

"Have you seen him?"

"No. But I think—" he broke off, saying in a louder tone: "I can only give you £15 each; my own supply is running short."

Polliter swung round to meet the triumphant, yet scowling and suspicious, gaze of Jean, who had entered the room again unheard, and was now moving stealthily towards the bed.

"M——d!" Jean snarled. "Secrets, hey!" Suddenly he became aware that Petersen's hands were twitching, and he seemed to freeze gradually into an uneasy silence.

Two minutes later Polliter took his departure. Jean wished to follow him, but the man upon the bed, ominously enough, desired the pleasure of Jean's company for a little while longer.

CHAPTER V

INFORMATION RECEIVED

LIFE, Louis, the old waiter at the Bêche Noire, used to say, had taught him many lessons; and not the least of them the folly of optimism. None but a confirmed optimist can thrust his hands with any eagerness or confidence into that gigantic lucky-bag, the future. And Louis considered that the price of the "dip" demanded by the present was invariably extortionate.

Nevertheless, for once it seemed as if Louis were being offered a dip in the lucky-bag free of charge. But the method of plunging in his hands caused him some perplexity. At his age haste had few attractions, and he allowed himself considerable time in which to consider the problem of the "Invisibles."

The problem was complex, as Louis soon discovered. Discreet inquiries brought forth no elucidation; there were no rewards being offered for information that would lead to the recapture

of convicts escaped from New Caledonia; nor could Louis find, search as he would, in his newspapers any mention that such an escape had been effected.

And yet he was undaunted; he would have wagered his soul (only Louis had no idea he possessed one) that he had seen and conversed with two of the once notorious gang of expert thieves known as the "Invisibles." He had known them well by sight a score of years ago, when the Bêche Noire was under Bricquet's capable, if tight-reined management; and he had a vivid recollection of the extraordinarily dramatic trial which had aroused the interest of all Europe, and had ended in the gang's deportation for life to the penal colony on the other side of the world.

An old man's convictions are obstinate: Louis's opinions were not to be shaken. The "Invisibles" had escaped, that was plain, for two of them at any rate had returned to Paris.

The knowledge of that fact alone was of value to some one; there was money to be made out of it; and Louis wanted money—a nice fat, round sum, which, added to his savings, would enable him to doff the apron, badge of servitude to the detested M. Josephs, and to purchase the good-will and stock of a quiet little country inn where, his own

master at last, he might spend his remaining years in comparative idleness.

The scheme was dear to Louis's heart, and he happened just at that time to have in his mind's eye the very inn he longed for. A couple of hundred francs more in his pocket, and the vision would materialise.

The question remained: Who would pay him that sum for the information he had for sale? A levy (blackmail, if you like: Louis preferred the shorter word) pressed upon the "Invisibles" had its recommendations; but Louis had recollections of the gang that were distinctly discouraging, not to say fearful.

Probably he might never catch sight of them again, for Louis thought he had seen, in the behaviour of "My Lord" and "Captain Salter," in Room 20, signs of a suspicion that the Bêche Noire was not a "safe" trysting-place.

Had a reward been offered, it is doubtful whether Louis would have dared to claim it. He had scant desire for his name to be connected with the affair; the identity of the claimant of police rewards somehow always did "get round." With others this would not matter much; but with the "Invisibles!"

Louis was not given to nervous tremblings, but

he felt a distinctly curious "creeping" of the sparse hair left on his scalp at the thoughts the "Invisibles" evoked.

The best plan that suggested itself was a visit to a certain M. Faverol.

Now, Faverol's business was to hunt down criminals and bring them to justice; and none, not even his quarry, bore him malice. It was (they considered) only a game of chance, after all, and they paid their losses, as a rule, with equanimity, so long as they were sure there were no cards under the table.

Louis was the kind of "card under the table" they objected to. To be explicit, after the decease of the lynx-eyed Bricquet, Louis had contracted a habit of making periodical "reports" to M. Faverol concerning the presence of undesirable citizens frequenting the Bêche Noire, a habit of which M. Josephs was in happy ignorance, his nearest approach to enlightenment being a fleeting wonder at the extraordinary blindness of the police to what went on in the establishment he controlled.

It never got beyond wondering, because M. Josephs quickly came to the same conclusion each time: that it was his own cleverness which baffled all suspicion.

Conceit proverbially is blind. Josephs should

have known that the Bêches Noires of great cities are of the greatest use to the police; they exist on sufferance; and, assuredly, each has its counterpart of Louis.

While still pondering over the best method of making capital out of his projected interview with Faverol, Louis received early one morning a summons to appear before M. Josephs. For some time past that unshaven worthy had been studying with peculiar care the meritorious, if fictitious, register kept by the porter, and, as a result, was in a vile temper.

The receipts had been dwindling, and, suspicious of a "leakage," Josephs had proved conclusively to himself that the porter and Louis were hand-in-glove in robbing him of his hard-earned gains. It made Josephs attack his unclean fingernails so viciously that he gnawed them to the quick; he was mortified at such ingratitude. But he was in a dilemma.

He dare not dismiss the porter; the rogue knew too much; but Louis, that blind, old, useless bag of bones, whom he had kept merely out of charity—Louis should "pack." Josephs was righteously indignant.

It may be as well to whitewash Louis's character as far as possible, and say that he had no

complicity in the leakage referred to. For that the ingenious porter alone was responsible.

Relying on Louis's general appearance of dull-witted old age, the register-keeper had omitted to enter in his book the fees and what he considered should be the names of a goodly proportion of the guests who had occupied rooms for which Louis was responsible. It was a simple and profitable omission, and it worked well, until the greedy proprietor began to be suspicious and kept a private check on the occupations of the rooms in question.

Josephs had no intention of sifting the question of guilt. No. Louis must go; his dismissal would warn the porter of the advisability of honesty in the future; and, later, Josephs would introduce better arrangements to ensure that honesty. Josephs had an immense opinion of his own tact in these matters. When Louis duly appeared before him, he ceased maltreating his fingers, and cloaked his rage with a hypocritical expression of kindliness that would have deceived no one, least of all the old waiter.

"Louis," he said, "you are getting old."

"Yes, M'sieur."

"I have noticed lately you have not been looking well."

Louis blinked, and made no reply; sympathy from his employer made him secretly amused.

"You look worried," Josephs went on; "you have something on your mind." It was a hint. Josephs was proud of it. He looked at Louis in a fatherly way, as if inviting him to confess and be forgiven.

"Merely the interests of M'sieur," stated Louis.

"My interests!" sneered Josephs, his temper getting the upper hand. "Well, I am going to give you a holiday—a rest from your exertions on my behalf."

"A holiday!" Louis began to realise that he was "on the carpet."

Josephs brought his fist down on the register with a bang. "Do you not deserve one?" he cried.

"That is hard to say, M'sieur; but I appreciate Monsieur's great kindness." The words were humble, and all that could be desired; but the old man's twisted smile and the lift of his tufted eyebrows irritated Josephs beyond measure.

"You can go to-day," he shouted.

"Thank you, M'sieur."

"And to-morrow."

"A thousand thanks, M'sieur; but to-morrow is not necessary. I was intending to ask——"

"And the next day," roared Josephs, "and all the days after that."

Louis stiffened. "Ah! A dismissal, M'sieur? After all these years?—M. Bricquet——"

Josephs cut him short. "Go and join your precious Bricquet," he shouted.

"As God and M'sieur please," retorted Louis gravely. He was not a believer in a Divine Being; but the phrase pleased him and would annoy Josephs, so he gave it utterance. With great deliberation Louis took off his apron and, rolling it up into a neat bundle, placed it upon the table in front of Josephs.

"With Monsieur's permission I will retire," Louis said with a bow; then he turned, walked out of the room with an elaborate dignity, leaving Josephs staring after him dumbfounded with rage.

Louis had robbed him a second time. Josephs had expected pleadings, protestations, tears even; he had hoped for them, and, being a bully, was disappointed at the humility of his victim. Moreover, the humility was assumed; Louis was laughing at him; Josephs writhed at his estimation of the number of filched "ten francs," which would give Louis the courage to laugh at being dismissed.

Rage is not a healthy state of mind to men of M. Josephs' build and habits, and it was, perhaps,

a good thing for him that he could not follow Louis's movements during the rest of the day. Louis took care that no one should do that.

The dismissal spurred Louis to action. On leaving Josephs' presence he clambered slowly upstairs to his garret, arrayed himself in his Sunday suit of black, and after transferring a newspaper cutting from a drawer to his breast pocket, left the Bêche Noire without delay.

Half an hour's steady walking brought him to Faverol's private address. It was not yet nine o'clock, and the old waiter found that artist among thief catchers smoking an after-breakfast cigarette in his "study"; and, as Faverol had no immediate business pressing, he was by no means averse to an informal chat.

Faverol put a certain value on his informal little chats with those who, like Louis, came to him with subjects worth gossiping over. The police agent was a genial little man, always sympathetic; while he cultivated an aptitude for inviting confidences, of which he was somewhat unduly proud.

"What is it this time?" he inquired of Louis with a playful smile. Then, without waiting for an answer to so direct a question, he added, "Oh, that café of yours. I fear we shall have to take steps—some day."

He clapped his hands together insinuatingly, as though the Bêche Noire were a troublesome mosquito and he were putting a firm but kindly end to its existence.

"It is useful," Louis remarked.

"Ah, you understand so well," murmured Faverol approvingly. "Yes, it is useful. But what should we do without you to help us?"

Louis shrugged his shoulders. "I have been dismissed by Josephs," he stated, without emotion.

"Dismissed! You!—Dear, dear! We must have that altered. You are too good and—er—faithful a servant to be dismissed. What is supposed to be your fault?"

"Age," replied Louis succinctly.

"Phoo!"—Faverol expended a deep breath—"I am relieved. I was afraid, perhaps, it was connected with our last little conversation. No? Well, that at least is satisfactory. Now about this dismissal—dear, dear!—after thirty years!"

"Thirty-five years," Louis corrected him, though he knew Faverol had a fondness for making wilfully inaccurate statements for no apparent reason whatever.

"Thirty-five years—thirty-five years? Why, it is a life sentence!"

"It has seemed so since Bricquet died," agreed Louis, taking the serious view of the other's last remark. "That was a man to serve under."

Faverol bent his head in tribute to the qualities of the departed villain. "You and I had no little chats in his time," he remarked.

"No, M'sieur," Louis replied. "Bricquet was not a fool like Josephs. It was not wise to talk overmuch while Bricquet was alive. The Bêche Noire was 'safe' in those days—and quiet. I doubt if even Lavigne gave it a thought. But the trial of the 'Invisibles' brought the place into notice; it has never been quite the same since.

"Monsieur remembers the 'Invisibles'? Ah! what men! They frequented the Bêche Noire a great deal before they were sent away to New Caledonia. Yes, I knew them well; and Hippolyte Courtois, the man who claimed the reward offered for their capture.

"I often wonder what became of him. He was brave—yes; but if I were he, and ever heard that the 'Invisibles' had escaped, I should go straight to the nearest river and throw myself in."

Faverol lighted another cigarette. For all Louis's aimless manner, he shrewdly suspected that the old man had a motive for becoming reminiscent.

"I remember the trial quite well," Faverol observed, "and I agree with you. But Hippolyte Courtois if he is alive, can breathe freely. He runs no risk now.

"Let me tell you a few facts. The 'Invisibles,' as the others were called, made several attempts to escape.

"A few months ago they made their last, for they were eaten by the natives of New Caledonia for their folly.

"There has been a rebellion out there—er—out there. Yes, and I had the news from a—h'm—friend who came home wounded. He's died since, poor fellow."

Faverol sighed to the memory of a man who never existed. It was one of his curious little inaccuracies for which there was indeed no reason. Without harm he might have said he got the news in a letter from a relative who belonged to the escort of the governor of the far-distant island.

But then Faverol would have lost the opportunity of sighing, and it has already been said that he was sympathetic.

"As for Courtois," he went on, "it is known he went to Africa. He made a nice little profit out of his part of the affair. Where he is now, Heaven alone knows."

"It was worth something, then, to give information about the 'Invisibles'?" said Louis, half as a statement, half in question.

"Indeed it was," returned Faverol carelessly. "André Gaspard and his gang were the cleverest set of rogues we ever had difficulty in laying by the heels. They deserved their name. Lavigne, who managed their capture, made his reputation by it."

Faverol was jealous of Lavigne, and he could not prevent a touch of envy from showing in his voice when he mentioned him.

"Supposing the 'Invisibles' had escaped alive," asked Louis with diffidence, "would a reward now be offered?"

Faverol expressed his inability to answer correctly, and rose from his chair. He imagined the interview was at an end.

He had not been deceived by Louis's apparent senile garrulity. From the first mention of their names he had suspected that the old man had gleaned some garbled account of the departure of the "Invisibles" from New Caledonia, and had come to him to see what could be made out of it. In giving him the real facts of the case, as he knew them, Faverol quite thought he had knocked the bottom out of Louis's hoped-for bargain.

But Louis showed no intention of taking his

leave. "If the 'Invisibles' had escaped," he repeated, slowly, "and returned to France, the man who captured them would become famous. You, yourself, Monsieur Faverol, would jump at the chance?"

"Bah!" exclaimed the other, brushing away the subject with a sweep of his hand. "About this dismissal, now——"

"If Monsieur would first answer my question," Louis interrupted, doggedly. Faverol glanced at him sharply.

"Let us keep to facts," he said, scornfully; but he sat down again. Louis waited in silence.

"Well?" resumed Faverol, after a pause. "About this dismissal of yours? What do you want me to do?"

Louis regarded him with surprise. "Why, nothing, Monsieur," he answered. "It is not pleasant to be turned away after so long a service; but I had fully intended to leave the Bêche Noire very soon. It was about that I came to see you to-day. There is a little shop, quite a humble affair, which I think I could take over profitably; the good-will of the business is not exorbitant. Two hundred francs, I think, would cover it." He paused, expectant.

"Two hundred francs!"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Well, now, about this shop?"

"No, Monsieur—about this two hundred francs."

"You have saved."

"I!" Louis made a grimace.

"You are concealing something from me."—Faverol looked reproachful. "Come, it is a big sum."

"Monsieur Lavigne would not think so."

"Bah! Let us leave Lavigne out of it. That decrepit old fossil!"

"Very well."

"But two hundred francs!"

"It was said that Hippolyte Courtois asked a thousand besides the State reward; and Lavigne gave it to him."

"Ah! you know that, do you?—But the 'Invisibles' were worth it."

"I am glad you think so," retorted Louis. "I ask only two hundred."

"Bah! let us keep to facts," said Faverol again.

"I am doing my best to persuade Monsieur," returned Louis patiently.—"Two hundred francs."

Faverol again rose from his chair, and left the room for a few minutes. When he returned, he

was carrying a small bag made of stout buff-coloured paper, a bag such as one sees in rows along the ledges of bank counters near the cashier's desk. He placed the bag gently on the table in front of him, and kept flicking it with his forefinger.

"I am a man of my word," he said, briskly, very different from the lazy tones in which he had been speaking. "If your facts are facts—if you can give me one thing that is not surmise but definite—here's your shop." He pushed the bag a little towards Louis, then drew it back again. "If not——"

"One moment, M'sieur," put in Louis. "If you do not consider my facts are facts, will you at least be generous? Will you advise Josephs I am still young and active?"

"I will not do so personally; but it can be arranged."

"Very well, Monsieur. I have to inform you that the 'Invisibles' were not eaten by the cannibals, as you say. I tell you, André Gaspard and Kit Polliter were in Room 20 at the Bêche Noire on the night of September 1. I waited on them myself. And they expected a third—Jean—the 'Rat,' he was called."

"What nonsense are you saying!" burst out Faverol, with scorn; but he spoiled the effect by

adding indignantly. "And you have left coming to tell me of it until now!"

"I could not leave the café," Louis lied, glibly.

"Pooh! A letter——"

"I have the indiscretion to write a letter! Surely Monsieur is joking?"

"Of course I am; and so are you, Louis, my friend. Come, confess; you overheard a report that these men had escaped, and you imagined you saw them. Really, I begin to think Josephs' opinion about you is right."

"As M'sieur pleases. Lavigne——"

"I shall 'placard' your statement," Faverol broke in sharply, "and with your name as the informant."

"Very well, M'sieur." Louis leaned forward and looked Faverol square in the eyes. There was no doubt, for once, at any rate that he was absolutely sincere. "If you do," he said slowly, "I shall drown myself."

"Bah! We waste time," cried Faverol suddenly, after a pause. "You have my word your name shall not be divulged. Tell me all you know."

"From June to September, on the first of each month," Louis began, "a woman has been in the habit of coming alone to the Bêche Noire. I know

that because she always asked for Room 20—one of my rooms."

"Do you know who she is?" demanded Faverol.

"No. Josephs may—possibly. I was hoping to find out. She is of good birth, that is evident, though she wishes to be thought of the people. But she knew the side door and the way things are done. I expected an assignation, and I was waiting."

"Yes. Go on"—impatiently.

"The last time I waited on her, that is September 1, after she had supped, she went on to the gallery over the dancing-saloon. It was a custom of hers; she would wait until a few minutes after eleven, and then depart. Well, on this occasion something happened. Eleven had just struck, when Josephs brought in a man she evidently knew. She became very excited, and I expected her to faint. But, no, she had determination, that one. I was sent down with a message to the man who had come in. He was talking with another man who had been sitting by himself with his back to us. Josephs had gone out again."

"What was the message?"

"'If you are a believer in luck, come to Number 20,'" Louis quoted. "He showed no surprise, and followed me without a word!"

"Ha! a signal, evidently."

"That was plain enough," Louis went on. "They had a long talk. I tried to hear what was said; but Number 20 is the one awkward room for listening."

"No doubt they knew that."

"And I had other rooms to attend to. I did not gather much. He called her 'Ninette,' and she called him 'André.' They quarrelled. I heard her say: 'Do you wish to offer me thanks for contriving your escape?' and something about 'crying out his presence in Paris.' Then I was called away again. When I got back the man André was telling her to go to London and to make friends with the wife of a man called"—Louis paused, blinking his eyes— "I forget for the moment. Then the man André spoke about the Bêche Noire, and asked if it was still 'safe.' I did not catch her answer; but a little later my own name was mentioned, and then the bell called me to go in. I saw the woman had been weeping. A woman is a fool to weep once her good looks begin to go. He got her away as quickly as he could, though she did not want to leave him."

Louis then gave a detailed account of what happened subsequently in Room 20. Little had escaped his notice when he had been present;

and if, for the things that had happened in his absence, he drew a little upon his inventive powers, he was, as a matter of fact, remarkably near the truth. Apathetic and dull-witted as Louis would appear, he was a clever old rogue; and he made his tale circumstantial enough to be fairly convincing.

The very gaps in Louis's narrative tended towards this result. Both Louis and Faverol were men who found it expedient at times to hide their lights under a bushel. An assumed stupidity is a great asset in a world of bargainers. The good wine is in cobweb-covered bottles as a rule.

"I had my ideas," Louis ended up. "I went to the window and looked down into the street, and I saw Polliter, the 'Captain Salter,' cross the 'Bottle' and join a little man—the 'Rat' is very small. I did not see the man André Gaspard again; he must have gone down the private staircase. Number 20 is at the head of it, and you only have to take a few steps and turn to the left. Evidently he knew his way about. After they had gone I could not 'place' any of them for a time; but when I got upstairs I looked through my papers, and I found this.—I knew then."

Louis produced the newspaper cutting from his pocket, and, unfolding it, offered the portraits of André Gaspard and his gang to Faverol's gaze.

Faverol, throughout, had listened with the keenest attention. He was an artist in his profession; he realised the possibilities of fame (as he understood it) open to him if Louis's facts were indeed facts. He was inclined to be convinced; certainly he meant to follow up this case; but it was no part of his bargain to allow Louis an insight into his intentions.

"Phoo!" he exclaimed. "How could you recognise them after twenty years, almost?"

"One knows what one knows," returned Louis with dogged obstinacy. He reached across and touched the portrait of Gaspard. "Put a neat moustache and beard, greyish and his own, to that—and you have it. The complexion is as one would expect, with many lines about the eyes and at the sides of the mouth. The eyes are peculiar; very dark and deep-set. At times they appear almost green. In person he is big, and yet does not look it. He was strong as a young man; now, I should say, he is a lion. Between his thumb and forefinger there is a muscle as big as a walnut. But the hands are not rough."

"All that helps little," said Faverol, abruptly. "And the other—this Captain Salter?"

"Ah! Polliter. He is more difficult, because his face, as you see, is common. He is tall and thin.

Eyes brown. Clean-shaved. His skin is burnt dark, but he has the sallow bloodless look of one of our conscripts sent home with the fever from hot climates. Hair, dyed. Hands never still. He has changed a lot, but I knew him. I cannot explain why, but I recognised him before the other. It was while trying to remember why I knew him that I came across this. The whole affair was plain then."

He reached over and touched the portrait of Gaspard again, covering the lower half of the face with his fingers. Louis was making his discovery seem easier than it had been. He had not recognised Polliter as one of the "Invisibles" until the old portraits brought them back to his mind.

At first it had all been very vague, a mere suspicious intention luckily followed up; and now, convinced himself, he wished to state a good case for Faverol. And he saw that the secret police agent was impressed. Had Louis possessed proof positive he would have aspired to greater profit than a paltry two hundred francs.

When he had finished his narrative, there was a long pause. Then Faverol crumpled up the newspaper cutting and threw it carelessly into a waste-paper basket.

"Very interesting," he remarked pleasantly; "but all imag—er—supposition."

"Then the information is of no use to you?" inquired Louis with patient resignation. His eyes blinked and blinked.

Faverol smiled indulgently. "I fear not," he said. "It is—er—so incomplete. I still think the 'Invisibles' became a meal, a tough one, no doubt." He chuckled. His life was so full of grim, big things, that Faverol made what jests he could out of trivialities, then: "I will do my best for you with Josephs."

Louis sighed, and rose from his seat, murmuring thanks. "By the way," observed Faverol artlessly, "what did you say was the name of the man in London whom Ninette and that other—milord—were discussing?"

"I did not say any name," replied Louis, blinking more than ever. He had relied on Faverol's notice of the omission. "I forgot it."

"Tut! A good memory is priceless; but it cannot be expected to last for ever. Well, never mind; it does not matter. But one never knows; it might have been worth something."

"Two hundred francs, M'sieur," retorted Louis.

Faverol laughed pleasantly. "Jog your me-

mory, my dear Louis," he advised, pushing the little bag slowly across the table.

Louis hesitated, as if racking his brains, then stretched out his hand. "The name is Gautil," he said distinctly, as his fingers took the place of Faverol's and closed over the price of a jogged memory.

Leaving M. Faverol to reflect at leisure upon his bargain, Louis paid a visit to his bank, and very shortly several more paper bags were added to the one already in his pocket.

Louis's savings were not magnificent; the officials at the bank did not demand notice of withdrawal. Then he took the train out of Paris to Marleon-sur-Seine, a country village some fifty miles away.

Here, in the name of George Martel, Louis transacted very satisfactorily certain business matters with reference to a little inn—(Louis also made inaccurate statements at times; he told Faverol only what he thought Faverol should know)—the inn long coveted; then he returned to Paris.

It was very late, or, rather, early (for it was past midnight), when Louis passed up the quayside and slipped into the alley under Gronnet's warehouse.

Just before he emerged into the "Bottle" he crouched to one side in a dark recess, for a man had come out of the private swing-door of the

Bêche Noire and came running past him through the alley.

It was the porter, conscience-stricken on hearing of Louis's dismissal, and fearful of the fate hanging over himself, now forestalling his own imagined doom, and severing his connection with the Bêche Noire for ever. But he took the precaution of taking with him on his flight the whole of the night's "takings" as a kind of consolation.

Louis recognised the runaway, though he had no idea as to the reason for the man's absence from his post. But it was a stroke of luck beyond his wildest hopes.

Louis had returned to the Bêche Noire with vague notions simmering in his brain, notions that he could not shake off, and chiefly connected with retaliation upon Josephs for an unjust dismissal. He was very obstinate, and it has never been hinted even that Louis was anything but a very unpleasant person.

Now the absence of the porter, the one man who of necessity need know of his return, allowed Louis's ideas to course into a definite channel. He pushed open the swing-door and made his way upstairs past the deserted grille, along a dark passage, and up more stairs to his garret.

No one had seen him. Quickly he pulled out of

the box all his old newspapers, crumpled them one by one with painstaking noiselessness, and arranged them in a loose heap under and around the bed.

Then, going to the door, he listened for a few moments for the sounds of any one moving below. Hearing nothing to alarm him, Louis closed the door again, went back to the bed, and, striking a match, set a light to the paper in several places. Then he sped from the room and away from the place that had given him a livelihood for the last thirty-five years.

The top of the house is, as a rule, the wrong place to perpetrate arson successfully; and, perhaps, Louis only intended to mark his displeasure by inflicting a moderate punishment on M. Josephs. But the Bêche Noire was old, a place of dry, worm-eaten beams, wooden partitions, paper, and paint —and wickedness. It cried out to be cleansed by fire; and fate, retribution—Providence—sent its answer by the humble hand of old Louis.

But it was the porter who got the blame of a stupid world.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT HAPPENED AT SECKLEY COTTAGE AT HALF-PAST TEN

"GEORGE HERON" left Janesford under a promise to return and make a longer visit as soon as his engagements would allow. Trevor Wyer had found himself even more attracted by his guest's personality than he had been when on board the *Orassa*.

True, it occurred to the Hon. Trevor that in some ways his friend was singularly reticent; but Heron was undoubtedly a gentleman, and Wyer was satisfied. The idea of questioning his guest directly, or indirectly, never entered his head.

In Wyer this lack of the bump curious was innate; he came of a family which instinctively regarded curiosity, if not as one of the deadly sins, as exceedingly ill-bred.

A week after his departure Heron wrote from Nellist's Hotel asking Wyer to come up to London and spend a few days as his guest. The invitation

was put in such a way that Wyer could hardly refuse; though, strangely enough, he had no particular wish to leave Janesford.

Really, Wyer ought to have found life there drag somewhat; he had far too much spare time; angling was poor, owing to the long drought; and his social obligations were almost a negligible quantity. Besides, as he told Heron, when they met in London, nothing ever "happened" Janesford way.

The country had been drowsing for centuries, and apparently intended continuing in its lethargic state for ever and aye. In time, even the vivid green jalousies added to Seckley Cottage, which had so roused the ire of Heron and the departed Pooler, would lose their inharmonious look of wakefulness, and snuggle down to the never-ending doze of the countryside.

Gautil, Wyer said, had not yet put in an appearance; but a certain Madame, or Mrs. Aubertin, a French lady, had called upon Mrs. Gautil one day when Wyer happened to be present, to make inquiries as to lodgings in Seckley village; and the cottages all being unsuitable, Wyer had recommended a farmhouse lower down the river. Of Celeste Gautil the Hon. Trevor said nothing, though the omission in itself might have con-

veyed much to a less observant person than Heron.

At its conclusion, Wyer's London visit was slightly marred by an unfortunate occurrence. He had wished, as he told Heron, to return home in time to dine at Seckley Cottage, an engagement entered upon before Heron's invitation arrived.

It had been Wyer's intention to leave the train at Ardley and walk down the riverside to the old dower house; but owing to some mistake on Heron's part, he missed the afternoon express at Paddington, and was compelled to travel by a much later train, which reached Ardley at 10.45 P.M.

In the interval of waiting it was useless returning to the hotel, as Heron had been on the point of setting out for Vienna; so, after sending a telegram of apology to Mrs. Gautil, and another to Janesford ordering that the dog-cart should meet him at Ardley Station, Wyer loafed about Hyde Park until his train was due to leave. His reason for still preferring Ardley Station to the more convenient one of Beaudelay was, perhaps, best known to himself; possibly, the anticipation of an exhilarating ride behind his beloved little mare had something to do with it.

Here it may be remarked that soon after Wyer's

message, a second telegram was delivered at Seckley Cottage, postmarked Aldgate, E.: "Send brougham to meet 10.45 train to-night." This telegram lacked a superscription.

When he emerged from the booking-office at Ardley Station, Wyer found the brougham waiting. Hatt was on the box; and Boris, the Gautils' big boarhound, stalked up from somewhere in the deep shadows and condescended to acknowledge Wyer as a biped known and to be trusted.

"Seen anything of my boy on the road?" Wyer asked, feeling very annoyed that his dog-cart was not in evidence.

"No, sir," Hatt replied. "Beggin' your pardon, sir, but I expect he's having a turn-up with the mare. He often says he can't manage her at night through the woods."

Wyer swore. An erring servant was one of the few things that aroused in him the Janesford temper.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," Hatt went on, "but do you happen to know if the master was on the train?"

"Can't have been," Wyer replied. "I was the only passenger to get down."

Hatt muttered something almost inaudibly;

then: "I'd best be getting back, sir, I'm thinking. Might I offer you a lift, sir, till we meet the dog-cart?"

"Good idea. Thanks. I'll come up beside you. I never could stick the inside of a pill-box. Here! catch hold!" Wyer added, hoisting up his kit-bag, and swinging himself up after it.

"You'll excuse me askin', sir," Hatt said suddenly, as soon as the carriage had cleared the station gates. "Didn't you send a telegram to the cottage this afternoon?"

"Eh?"

"No liberty, sir. I heard the mistress and Miss Celeste talkin' about it."

"Yes, I did wire. What of it?"

"You didn't send two, sir?"

"Not to the cottage. Why?"

"Well, sir, two came—one top o' t'other. And I'm thinking they scrummeled 'em up like at the post-office; and that's why I'm here, and your boy's not."

"Won't wash," Wyer replied indifferently. "My second telegram would go through Beaudelay. Besides, you came to meet Mr. Gautil, didn't you?"

"I took it that way, sir. The mistress said, 'Meet the ten-forty-five with the brougham.

Take Boris.' Mr. Gautil likes the dog to meet him, sir; and it's his usual train, the ten-forty-five. But I dunno—" Hatt grumbled to himself for a little while; then suddenly whipped up the horse quite unnecessarily.

"Hullo!" Wyer ejaculated indignantly. "What's that for?"

"I don't like it, sir."

"Don't like what?"

"The telegram, sir."

"You won't like it any better for lashing your horse."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but I'm thinking something may be wrong."

"Eh?"

"A 'plant,' sir."

"Look here, Hatt! Have you been stopping anywhere on the road?"

"Not a spot, sir. What I mean is, if the master hadn't meant comin', he wouldn't have telegraphed. Leastways, he'd 'a let the mistress know he'd been stopped. I know the master, sir. Me out of the way, who's to know what's goin' on at the cottage? Y' see, sir, we're early 'uns to bed; and master won't have any one sit up for him. He's a good master, sir—no liberty—but we've got to mind our p's and q's, sir."

"Good heavens!" Wyer broke in. "A burglary, eh? The museum stuff!" Then he suddenly bethought him that there were none but womenfolk left in the cottage. "Whip him up, Hatt!" he cried. "Why, the deuce, didn't you say so at first?"

Hatt remained silent; over most things his brain worked slowly. Had it been otherwise, he might have been wearing his sergeant's stripes, instead of being a humble, if very sturdy, guardian, butler, handy-man-in-general to the Gautil family. Possibly Mr. Gautil engaged him for this very reason. The best servant is not always the one with the liveliest intelligence.

By this time they were approaching the deserted forge on the little common; and on turning a corner they perceived some distance ahead a pair of lights swaying unsteadily across the road. Presently plaintive objurgations reached their ears.

"That's my dog-cart," Wyer exclaimed. "Knocks the head off a mistake at the post-office, anyhow. Whoa! Hatt. Drop me down here. You drive straight on. I'll leave the dog-cart at the lodge gates and follow you down the drive on foot. No need to bring Tom into this. And it's all moonshine, all said and done," he added to

himself, as he jumped down and hastened to take charge of the jibbing mare.

At the lodge Wyer handed the reins again to the lad, bidding him walk the now mollified Primrose up and down the road until he returned. About halfway down the drive Wyer came upon Hatt, engaged in hitching his horse to a sapling. Wyer burst out laughing.

"Hullo!" he inquired banteringly. "What's the idea? Are we moonlighters, bushrangers, or what, Hatt?"

"They'd hear us and bolt if we went farther," grumbled Hatt, extinguishing the lamps.

The sky was pitch black, and a fitful wind came sweeping in gusts up the valley, filling the night with the rustle of swaying branches. Dead leaves scurried about everywhere like frightened rats. Boris was nowhere to be seen.

Seckley Cottage gave no indication that anything was amiss. Thin bars of light streamed through the venetian blinds in the hall windows upon the carriage sweep; and above, as the men approached, in a half-opened, projecting window at the side of the house, a sudden flicker seemed to suggest that some one had lighted a candle.

"Miss Celeste's room," Hatt whispered. "Step quiet, sir."

"I'll wait here," Wyer replied. He, too, whispered, and was again struck by the likely absurdity of the whole affair; and the idea increased as Hatt disappeared round the house, walking with exaggerated caution. In a few minutes Hatt returned.

"For goodness' sake, come inside, sir," he gasped out, and, without waiting for a reply, he set off again, followed by Wyer.

They entered by the conservatory door facing the lawn, and went straight to Hatt's box-like room. The inner door leading thence to the big room, termed generally by every one the "museum," was open, and they hurried through. A lamp was burning upon a glass-topped cabinet, where Hatt had placed it a few minutes previously.

Wyer glanced quickly around him. He had not been in the "museum" before. It appeared to be in apple-pie order. Certainly, in the half-light, he failed to detect signs that burglars had been at work; and he shot a severe, questioning look at Hatt.

For answer, Hatt held the lamp up high, and pointed. On the wall facing them were half a dozen dingy oil paintings, portraits, and other studies; but opposite Wyer, one frame, a small one, yawned dismally—empty. And between the win-

dows at the far end of the room hung another, larger frame, also devoid of canvas. Behind him was a third in a similar plight.

"Cut! As neat—as neat," Hatt whispered. "They picked and choosed—the varmints!"

"Whee-ou!" breathed Wyer. He did not know what to think.

"And look here, sir"— Hatt pointed to the nearest cabinet, through the glass of which could be seen numerous articles of virtu—"there's three of them, the littlest, gone. And in the next there's two gone. This here's all right; but in that 'un yonder with the Chinee titivations there's some gone"—Wyer showed plainly that he was unconvinced—"I'll swear to it, sir, for I knows the place by heart, you might say, dusting it every blessed morning." Hatt was as nearly excited as his stolid nature would allow.

Wyer took the lamp from him and made a tour round the room, examining everything. The lids and doors of cabinets, the door to the hall, all were secure and locked. The windows were bolted, their opaque glass intact; and the inside, guarding bars were in place and firm. A massive steel safe stood in one corner; apparently it had not been tampered with.

A thought struck Wyer. "How was the door

from your room when you first came in?" he asked.

"Locked, sir," Hatt replied, rubbing his bullet head. "I carry the key about me. Jemima! it fairly licks me, sir. My name'll be Walker when master sees this."

Wyer stared at the man. Hatt did not appear to be the worse for liquor—always a possible explanation. Wyer was puzzled. He examined one of the empty picture frames. At one time or another a canvas had been cut out, though so neatly that the edges were barely noticeable.

Wyer swore softly. "Go and call your mistress," he commanded, putting down the lamp.

Hatt hesitated. "No, sir," he began. "I'm up a tree, sir." Wyer strode towards the door. Hatt barred the way. "Beggin' your pardon, sir," he went on doggedly, "but orders is orders. I must ask you to listen to me."

"What the deuce do you mean?"

"Master's orders, in case of anything like this happening, was I was to keep mum about it—not to tell any one in the house."

"Well, the police, then. Come on, man——"

Hatt shook his head. "The police, on no account, sir. Master said: 'Hatt, you're my police. That's why I employ you.' And I said:

'Very good, sir,' I said. Besides, what's the use of goin' and wakin' P. C. Sheepshanks, sir? Half an hour to get to his cottage, half to get him out and knuckle his eyes clear, and another half to get him back here—and then, what's old Mutton-legs and his notebook going to do?"

"Well, you told me, anyhow," Wyer put in.

"Yes, sir. And I'll be up before the colonel for that."

"Hatt, my man! Are you telling me the truth?"

"What 'ud be the sense, sir, in me tellin' you a pack of lies?"

"Hang it!" Wyer ejaculated suddenly. "Here are we holding a confounded corroboree! How about the people upstairs? Stir yourself, man! Go and find out if they're all right. Oh! blow your orders! You can make the excuse you came up to say your master's not arrived. Go on! Can't you see it won't do for me to—" He broke off, holding up his hand to enjoin silence. The handle of the door leading to the hall had been turned, and now some one was knocking gently.

"Dad! is that you?" they heard.

"Miss Celeste, sir!" whispered Hatt, and puffed out the lamp.

"You idiot!" exclaimed Wyer angrily, in low tones. "Oh, well, for goodness' sake, get out and explain."

"What shall I say, sir?" Hatt whispered anxiously.

"Say your master's not come."

As Wyer realised afterwards, he omitted to do the obvious thing—relight the lamp at once. But the darkness made him feel a fool—like a burglar himself. To add to his discomfiture, he heard footsteps in the passage to Hatt's room, and Celeste Gautil's voice inquiring:

"Hatt! Is that you, Hatt?"

"Yes, miss." Hatt planted his burly form in the outer doorway.

"Oh, that's right!" in tones of relief; then, as if not quite satisfied, "But I did not hear the carriage?"

"Didn't you, miss?" replied the wary Hatt. "Begging your, pardon, miss, but the master's not come."

"Not come? Then who were you talking to in there?"

"Talking, miss?" The waters of diplomacy were too deep for Hatt. He was floundering. To cut the situation short, Wyer struck a match and relighted the lamp.

"Who is in there?" Celeste Gautil demanded. "Stand aside, Hatt. I detest mysteries."

The ex-soldier took two paces to the left, and Wyer, coming from the inner room carrying the lamp, caught a glimpse of the girl in the passage.

A long, loose, pale-blue silk kimono enveloped her slim figure; and her hair, usually so delightfully irrepressible, was now brushed smoothly back from her temples, Puritan-like, and plaited for the night. It should have made her appear younger, more girlish; but, instead, she seemed to Wyer to have become a woman, and a most beautiful woman. A slight flush tinged her cheeks, though she was superbly without self-consciousness.

Wyer suddenly became aware that he possessed such things as pulses.

"Mr. Wyer!" Celeste exclaimed. She regarded him, he thought, frigidly, with a trace of mistrust even in her steady, brown eyes.

Wyer put the lamp upon a table near a low camp bed, and, to make it easy for her to depart, he pretended to busy himself with the wick. But to his surprise, when he looked up again she was still at the door.

"Well?" she demanded coolly.

Slightly nettled, Wyer put on the "grand

manner." "I beg to apologise for my apparent intrusion," he said in ultra-polite tones. "If you will allow me, I will go. My presence here is capable of the most simple explanation."

The girl stood her ground. "If it is so simple," she retorted, copying his manner, "I shall be obliged if you will kindly explain now."

Wyer inclined his head. "Would it not be, perhaps, more suitable to wait until morning?" he returned suavely.

With a little, almost petulant, exclamation, the girl turned to Hatt.

"Where is my father?"

"Not come, miss"—with an air of "that's-an-easy-one."

"Then why has the carriage not returned? Where is it?"

"Halfway up the drive, miss," Hatt replied sheepishly, feeling cornered.

"Yes, we tied the horse to a tree," Wyer interposed; then immediately cursed himself for a facetious fool.

Celeste ignored him. "Hatt! Explain, please!"

"It's right, miss. Beggin' your pardon, miss; but when I found the master wasn't come, I got uneasy like. Me and the dog out of the way, miss —there's a lot of vallybles in there, miss" (Hatt

jerked his thumb towards the museum). "And meeting Mr. Wyer—his dog-cart's waiting top of the drive—I made bold to ask him to come along. Two's better'n one, miss, y'see. I left the brougham in the drive, because——"

"Ah!" Celeste interrupted him. "You feared a—a—burglary.—And has there been one?" Wyer turned away.

"No, miss," Hatt lied stoutly.

"Where is Boris?"

"Can't say, miss. Last I saw of Boris, he was chasin' something, a rabbit maybe, down the drive." Boris, it must be stated, was about the size of a young donkey, and possessed a corresponding dignity.

"Then it was Boris I heard!" the girl exclaimed, half to herself.

She turned to Wyer. "Perhaps it is I who owe you an explanation," she remarked, with studied indifference. "I thought I heard some one walk past beneath my window; then I heard Boris making a very unusual noise down towards the river; and I was silly enough to imagine burglars, too. Then, listening outside my door, I heard voices in the house, and was a little surprised, as I had not heard the carriage return. And it was dark in here; and Hatt was so stupidly mysterious"—

she broke off abruptly; and Wyer thought he detected the ghost of a smile, instantly repressed.

"Hatt! Fetch the brougham at once, please; and see that Boris comes in. Good-night, Mr. Wyer."

When she had gone the men exchanged swift glances. "We'd best be going after Boris," Hatt said. "Like one of them, sir?" indicating a couple of stout cudgels standing in a corner.

"No. Prefer my fists. Look here, Hatt! I can't leave my mare walking up and down all night. You get the brougham in, then follow Boris down to the river. He's as good as two men." Hatt nodded. "They can't have had more than a quarter of an hour's start. We must just have missed them. Miss Gautil heard Boris shouting after we came in. We didn't hear him. Ten to one they've got a boat and will go down-stream. You beat down, and I'll push my mare and try to cut 'em off on the flat by Janesford. I won't tell my lad, unless it's necessary. If I don't see any signs of the beggars, I'll come up-stream to meet you. Right? Come on, then."

Wyer ran up the drive at top speed. In the road near the lodge, he came upon his lad standing at the mare's head and having great difficulty in restraining her.

"You're too rough with her," Wyer cried angrily, as he sprang into the dog-cart and grasped the reins. Tom scrambled up behind as best he could, and the mare set off along the pitch-black road at a furious speed.

"If you please, sir, she was as quiet as a lamb after you left; but as I was comin' along just now a little chap slithers over the hedge and runs acrost the road like a weasel, right under her very nose, a'most. I thought she'd jump outen her skin."

"Humph!" growled Wyer. "Poacher, I suppose." Inwardly he swore, thinking to himself, "That's one of the beggars got clear, for a fiver." But he pushed Primrose along the harder.

On reaching the Janesford avenue gates Wyer got down and sent the lad on with the dog-cart, saying he wanted to get something out of his boat, which was moored close by. But in a few moments he hurried back up the bank, scanning the stream intently as he went. It was nearly one o'clock, when, on turning the sharp corner at Folley Ford, Wyer almost ran into Hatt.

"Seen the varmints, sir?"

"No. Where's Boris?"

"Haven't seen or heard him, sir," said Hatt. "Gone home, I s'pose."

"Or on a man hunt." Wyer then told Hatt of the man who had frightened his mare.

"It's heaven help him, if Boris lays hold," Hatt said grimly. "What's to be done now, sir?"

"The police. No other course open," Wyer replied.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," Hatt pleaded, "but I hope you won't. It's the sack for me, most like, whatever happens. But if things are kept quiet until Mr. Gautil comes home, maybe I've a chance; for I can't hardly be blamed, when all's said and done. And I'd be sorry to leave a good place—and Miss Celeste, sir," he added.

Wyer lit his pipe, offered Hatt his tobacco pouch, and smoked for a while, pondering deeply. Had there been a robbery, after all? "All right," he said presently, though with evident disapproval. Then: "Well, I suppose there's nothing for it but bed, unless you'd like me to go back with you. No? Very well; good-night."

"Good-night, sir, and thank you."

Wyer fully intended calling at Seckley Cottage the next day or so for the purpose of getting to the bottom of the affair; but an unexpected pressure of work and a curious reluctance on his own part combined to prevent him. Then one afternoon Hatt rode over on horseback with a letter.

"From the master, sir," he said. "I was to deliver it by hand."

"Mr. Gautil's home? That's a good thing."

"Come and gone again, sir."

"Gone again!"

"Yes, sir; I drove him to the station this morning."

"I hope Mr. Gautil was not very—upset."

"Upset, sir? No, sir. He seemed quite himself, sir—and, beggin' your pardon, sir, if that's not the answer you looked for." Hatt's face was a study; and Wyer's opinion of him as a servant rose appreciably. There was no mistaking the implication that the man had been told to keep his tongue between his teeth.

"Quite right," Wyer said. "But, if it isn't against orders, I'd like to know what became of Boris the other night."

"When I got back, sir," Hatt replied slowly, "I had a look round the boathouse. And there was the dog hanging by his collar to the top of the high rails."

Wyer gave vent to an expressive whistle. "Not dead?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Haven't you heard? Strangled. Jumped short, I s'pose."

"Poor devil! But, hang it! a heavy dog like

Boris would have pulled those flimsy railings down in his struggles."

If Hatt had been a Frenchman, he would have shrugged his shoulders. As it was, his expression became pronouncedly more stolid than usual, even. "Yes, sir," he said. "begging your pardon, sir—certainly, sir," and touched his forehead.

Perceiving there was no more to be got out of the man, Wyer turned aside and tore open the letter.

"DEAR MR. WYER"—he read—"I understand you were put to considerable inconvenience on my account a few nights ago. Please accept my thanks and apologies for the stupidity of an over-zealous servant. I was detained in London, and omitted to advise my family. You will be relieved to learn that Boris, my dog, was the only loss I sustained. As I dislike publicity in any form, I shall esteem it a favour if you will aid me in avoiding the same. And really, my little things are of no value likely to tempt dishonest persons.

"Yours truly,

"SEBN. GAUTIL."

"No answer, Hatt," Wyer said, when he had read the letter a second time. "Tell Parminter to draw you some beer, or ask for a cup of tea, if you prefer it."

Hatt's visage lost all its woodenness; and, divining what his choice of beverages would be, Wyer began once more to wonder if his first impression had not been the right one: that Hatt's burglary, after all, could be explained in terms of beer.—

But those empty picture frames!

CHAPTER VII

VAN LANGENBERG, SHIPPER OF WINES AND SPIRITS

ABOUT halfway down the Ziegelstraat in Rotterdam, adjoining a narrow alley leading to some boat steps at the canal side, there is a small warehouse. The warehouse at the present day lies idle; but a legend in black lettering across the dingy office window still states that here, one, Van Langenberg, carried on the business of "Shipper of Wines and Spirits."

A modest, retiring kind of business, it was lacking in modern "push," and not given to advertisement. Apparently, just enough cases and casks passed through the warehouse to keep one clerk, two warehousemen, and one canal barge tolerably well employed, and allow the principal, Van Langenberg, to make both ends meet financially. That was the opinion of the Ziegelstraat.

Van Langenberg himself was regarded as an amiable eccentric, but a very poor man of business.

His small, rotund figure, with its jaunty gait, his twinkling blue eyes behind the big lenses of his spectacles, and his ever-ready smile, were the very personification of good humour. He had an open, ingenuous manner, and he would chat with all and sundry about everything under the sun, his own private affairs not excepted. Everything interested him, and nothing ever seemed to disturb him. Why should it? he would ask, when he had not a care in the world. He was unmarried, and he had the stomach of a schoolboy.

Van Langenberg lived on the premises where he made his money. No doubt his choice of domicile first gained for him the reputation of eccentricity, for few men of his position would care to reside in the Ziegelstraat—never a cheerful locality, desolate at night, and at certain seasons of the year invariably foggy.

It is curious that during the whole fifteen years of Van Langenberg's residence in the Ziegelstraat he had never invited any one up to his private apartments. It was his one reservation. He took his meals and entertained his acquaintances at his club; and the general opinion was that Van Langenberg's private quarters would not stand the test of an inspection, an opinion confirmed by his own

frequent assertions that he found his domestic arrangements very economical.

One misty evening, a few minutes before the warehouse and offices closed for the night, an odd-job porter entered Van Langenberg's office and deposited upon the floor a long and heavy leathern trunk which he had been carrying. He was followed closely by the owner of the trunk, who had "commercial" in every line of him. Stout, round-shouldered, wearing a grizzled beard and moustache, the "commercial" walked with the springless gait of the flat-footed. Few would have glanced at him twice, though, curiously enough, had he passed him in the street, the Hon. Trevor Wyer might have swung round for a second look, wondering to himself, "Who the deuce does that bounder remind me of?"

Possibly the answer might have been, "George Heron." But on further inspection the illusion would have been dispelled. At the most it was a fleeting, and by no means a flattering, likeness.

The "commercial" paid the porter and dismissed him; then he turned to Van Langenberg's clerk, who at that moment was ostentatiously changing his coat, preparatory to finishing work for the day.

The "commercial" pressed a card upon the

counter with his thumb. "By appointment," he said in a husky voice; "and bustle, my lad, for I am as anxious to get away from this misbegotten place as you are. I should think the devil was your paviour in these parts." He shuffled his feet gingerly, as if they still suffered from the effects of the cobble-stones, with which it may be said, the Ziegelstraat is paved from end to end.

For a second or two the clerk meditated upon a smart retort, but, thinking better of it, he snatched up the pasteboard and glanced at the name printed thereon.

"I didn't know you had an appointment," he said cheekily. He had no little experience of travellers' "bluff" to obtain interviews with his employer.

"You can't be expected to know everything at your tender age, my lad."

"What's your 'line'? I forget."

"Ledgers, stationery, office knicknacks——"

"We don't want anything. Anyway, you'd better call again in the morning."

"Go and tell your master I'm here—by appointment," said the "commercial" quietly.

The clerk was about to utter a glib lie that his master had gone home an hour ago, when Van Langenberg himself came down the stairs and into

his office. On seeing the "commercial," he stopped short. Standing, as he did, with his head cocked to one side, his mottled brown waistcoat bulging forward, and his hands under his coat tails, he appeared ridiculously like a pert young robin whose breast has not yet got its first tinge of red.

"So!" he twittered. "It is the German 'traveller.' Yes. And he has come again."

"A man in my business lives by coming again," the "commercial" replied. "Besides, I come by appointment. Have you forgotten?"

"Hey? And I gave him an appointment?"

"You did."

"H'm! What have you got? That trunk looks heavy."

"Ledgers, stationery—and other things."

"Well, a promise is a promise; and I keep my promises." Van Langenberg turned to his clerk, who was listening in sulky silence. "Young man," he said, "do we want any ledgers?"

"No, mynheer."

"Do we want anything?"

"We could do with a little stationery, perhaps," the clerk replied grudgingly. "But Olsens' traveller is due next week, and they're our usual firm."

"I can quote you cheaper and better than

Olsens," the "commercial" put in with professional eagerness. "My house——"

Van Langenberg interrupted him pleasantly. "You can go home to your young wife," he said in indulgent tones to his clerk. "Close the office. This gentleman and I will look at stationery together."

Muttering about the advantage of cheapness, he led the way upstairs. The "commercial" followed, staggering under the burden of his wares.

Van Langenberg's sanctum, evidently, had once been part of the warehouse, for at one end a kind of alcove projected out over the canal lying directly beneath.

A small, swinging crane for raising or lowering merchandise was still in position, swung in flat against the wall, and a close examination would have shown that the floor was "trapped." Giving an extensive view over the canal, a window had been fitted into the alcove.

On the opposite wall of the long room another window overlooked the Ziegelstraat; and a third window, a mere peephole, looked down into the narrow alley previously mentioned.

All these windows were heavily curtained. In the centre of the room, nearly opposite the door leading down to the clerk's office, and facing

the alcove, stood a massive, green baize-covered desk, upon which rested a big lamp with a green glass shade. Wooden cases and bottles of glass or earthenware lay about in disorder on all parts of the uncarpeted floor.

To the left of the desk stood a tall, glass-fronted cupboard, its shelves packed tight with ledgers, and brown paper parcels tied with variously coloured tapes.

A few yards to the right of the cupboard the wall projected into the room in the form of a right angle, in the shorter side of which was a door that the Ziegelstraat surmised led to Van Langenberg's private apartments.

Having ushered the "commercial" into his sanctum, Van Langenberg waited at the top of the stairs, until the banging of a door below announced the clerk's departure. Then the Dutchman closed the door at the stair-head and swung round upon his visitor.

"Ach! Gott!" he burst out, spluttering with sudden rage. "You come again—you! You come after what I said to you last time—without sending me word—like a fool—who cannot wait until it is dark. And you bring a trunk that size, and ask my clerk to believe it contains ledgers—and stationery. Ledgers! Stationery! Ach! I—

I could kill you!—poke out your eyes—like this — Ouf! Ouf!"

"Gently!" interposed the other, quite unmoved by the little man's fury. "Gently! or you will burst a blood-vessel. You are too stout for rages, Mynheer van Langenberg."

"I will burst twenty blood-vessels, if I like! And who are you to—" He cut short his rush of words, calming down with a suddenness that would have been comical had it not suggested design, that his outburst was, largely, a pose. Walking slowly across to his big chair at the desk, he seated himself, and added grudgingly: "Yes. You are right. The doctor warned me, just so. But who are you? Tell me that."

"My name is on my card. It will serve you, as 'Van Langenberg' serves me."

"Boof! Is that all you will say?"

"On that subject—yes."

"Then I will not buy your—stationery."

"You will, when you have seen it. You will pay promptly, too. I give you credit—er—only for not being an idiot."

"And I give you credit for nothing. I do not like you. I will not see your stationery. It is rubbish. Take it to the pawnshop." Van Langenberg surreptitiously pulled open a drawer.

Instead of arguing, the "commercial" knelt down and began unfastening his trunk. Happening to glance up, he found himself looking into the barrel of a small revolver which the Dutchman was holding in both hands, his elbows planted firmly upon the desk. Van Langenberg seemed to enjoy the situation.

"What prevents me?" he said thoughtfully, as if to himself. "No one would hear. I wait for a steamer passing to blow her siren, then—bang! And I get rid of something I have no use for—a fellow who one day springs from nowhere into my office like a jack-in-the-box, and says to me, 'You were not always in the wine and spirit business. You used to buy and sell other things—the Kohinoor, if it was brought to you. I will not bring you the Kohinoor yet; but I am going to bring you other things, and you, Van Langenberg, will buy them.'

"And when I say I do not understand him, and ask him to account for himself, he says, 'No. But you shall buy my stationery.' Now, I say, I will not buy his stationery; but perhaps I will take it from him.

"And he will not care one jot, because his carcase will be stuck in the mud at the bottom of the canal. And he will keep quite still, in answer to that."

"Try not to be a fool," said the "commercial" coolly. "I told you I gave you credit for that much. But neither am I a fool. In case you might think so, let me tell you I have left an interesting document with the right person, my lawyer, my banker, whoever you like. If I do not claim the document within a fixed time, it will be read, and then, Van Langenberg will ship no more wines or spirits, or other things. So you will see my stationery."

He stooped unconcernedly over his trunk again.

For a moment the expression on Van Langenberg's face became fiendish. Then, very slowly, he put the weapon away and pushed the drawer to with a click.

"One must be cautious," he whined, while scowling at the other's rounded shoulders. "I am a nervous man. Ach! but one must be cautious."

"Then why be stupid enough to blame me for being cautious?" the "commercial" replied without turning round.

"But cautious with me!" grumbled the Dutchman, in pained tones.

"With every one, Mynheer van Langenberg."

Van Langenberg beat a soundless tattoo upon the desk with his plump fingers. "At least you will tell me who spoke to you of me—of me, not as

the shipper of wines and spirits, you understand? You will tell me that?"

The "commercial" flung back the lid of the trunk, straightened himself stiffly, as many men past their fifties do after stooping, and leaned against the desk. "People like ourselves," he observed cryptically, "are liable to misfortunes. You have been lucky, but there are times when some of us disappear from pleasant society. You understand? Generally, one emerges with additional knowledge. One has, it might be said, been admitted into a kind of freemasonry."

Van Langenberg nodded understandingly. "So! You have been in 'klink,'" he said; "and some one spoke to you of me there."

"You state it brutally. But you are more or less right. I admit I have heard your name mentioned when I was not, perhaps, a free agent."

"His name?"

"Names—again?"

"Ach! Gott! Show me your tuppenny-ha' penny stationery. And I will tell you what I will pay for it." Van Langenberg removed his spectacles and wiped them, sighing resignedly. His whole manner was one of complete capitulation.

"You will pay me three thousand guineas in English money," the "commercial" replied deci-

sively. "And as I do not expect you to have Bank of England notes, I will take a draft on your own bank—payable to bearer."

"Boof! You want me to buy the Crown jewels from the Tower of London. Ta, ta, ta!"

"It is possible, some day."

"You are mad. Try to think in German pfennigs, then some day, perhaps, we can do business together."

"I never haggle."

"Ah, dear, you are angry with me, because I was careful. But I am a nervous man."

"I have charged extra for your caution in the bill. It will teach you to be more polite. You should remember you live by us 'travellers.'"

Abruptly turning away and stooping over the open trunk, the "commercial" pulled out and placed upon the floor near him a varied assortment of small articles that might possibly be in request in an office, a few packages of cheap stationery, and half a dozen ledgers of different sizes. It was a passable sample lot. Pointing to the stationery, the "commercial" remarked:

"That will satisfy your clerk. I suppose he is not——"

"No!" Van Langenberg interrupted quickly; "that young man knows nothing. Did you not

hear me tell him to go home to his wife? Yes, I will take it; and I will take also the ledgers; and he will think I am a weak old fool and tell all the other clerks in the Ziegelstraat. And it will be one more laugh at that silly old Van Langenberg, whose business is always going to smash—to-morrow."

He chuckled; then, his interest suddenly aroused at the sight of a long, cylindrical package of charts which the "commercial" was unrolling, he demanded: "Hey! What have you got there?"

"Charts, to begin with," replied the other curtly. He went on quickly unrolling, until he came to a core wrapped in brown paper. Ripping away the paper, he began unrolling again with more care.

"Pictures!" Van Langenberg exclaimed, in derision.

There were three of them. The "commercial" let two slide gently to the floor, the third he spread out upon the desk, placing ledgers upon the corners to keep it flat. Van Langenberg stood up and bent over the oil painting; then, with a gasp, he almost fell back into his chair.

"Gott! Gott in Himmel!" he croaked. He stared again at the picture.

"A 'Titian,'" the "commercial" pronounced

composedly. "You can see for yourself. You are as good a judge as any man living, I was told."

Van Langenberg glared at him. "The others! the others!" he demanded hoarsely.

The "commercial" spread another canvas upon the first. "A 'Rembrandt,'" he stated carelessly. "The same remarks apply to this one."

The Dutchman stared at it. "The other!" he almost shouted.

The last picture was a small one, a "Watteau"; one of that painter's daintiest.

Van Langenberg gave it but one glance, then with an extravagant gesture, he flung up his arms and rushed down the room like a man demented. Coming to the alcove, he savagely snatched aside the curtains and stood gazing through the window at the lights twinkling mistily on the far side of the canal.

In a few moments he returned to his chair. He appeared to have recovered somewhat his self-control, but traces of intense excitement were still visible. His cheeks, usually pink, were now carmine.

"Ach!" he blurted out with assumed rage. "Copies! You bring me copies. It is enough to make me mad. To give me all this trouble——"

"None of that nonsense," the "commercial" said in tones that brought the Dutchman up, as

sailors say, "all standing." "You know they are not copies."

"I know—" Van Langenberg rapped back, then checked himself, and added, "what I know."

"Among other things, you know they alone are worth to you what I ask. But I am fair. You run a big risk and expense in finding a market for them."

"The pictures alone! You have more?"

For answer, the "commercial" again stooped over his trunk, and, bringing out a number of stout cardboard boxes, he placed them upon the desk. Opening them with deft fingers, and flinging the empty boxes and their cotton-wool and tissue-paper packing to the floor, he arranged the contents of each in turn before Van Langenberg, who, as he examined and pushed away each article separately, kept up a running commentary consisting of the one ejaculation: "Devil!"

There were pieces of exquisite porcelain, bejewelled snuff-boxes, miniatures, jewel-cases, rings of historic interest, modern rings, diamond buckles; in short, a priceless collection.

Having emptied all the boxes, the "commercial" turned away, and, extracting from a chamois-leather belt next to his skin a magnificent necklace of large, even-sized pearls, he added it to the collection upon the desk.

"Three thousand English guineas," he quoted, in "take-it-or-leave-it" tones, seating himself for the first time during the interview. He sat stiffly upright, with his hands across his knees, elbows outwards, after the manner of heavily built, aggressive men.

Van Langenberg leaned on his elbows over the desk, his face between his palms; he appeared to be calculating the value of the articles before him. As a matter of fact, he did not even see them. He was thinking deeply—furiously.

The "commercial" yawned with noisy vulgarity, and put one hand into his side coat pocket. "Time is getting on," he remarked huskily. "It would be a pity if the document I spoke of were read by the wrong person."

"Yes," mumbled the Dutchman without stirring; "that would be a pity. But if I could say to myself, 'There is no document'—if I could say, 'This is a trap'"—he paused, and one hand dropped carelessly upon his lap.

"In case you are a fool," the "commercial" put in, yawning again, "you should know I have a revolver in my pocket; and it is pointing at you. So, if you open that drawer again, bring out nothing heavier than a cheque-book."

Van Langenberg turned round. For a nervous

man he was singularly cool. "Ach!" he said listlessly. "But I know that. Presently I will give you a cheque. You have quoted—I say it—a fair price. You are wise. I give you some credit, now—plenty of it. You are wonderful. But, attention! my German," he went on briskly. "I will make it four thousand English guineas if you will answer me this: Who are you?"

The "commercial" consulted his watch.

"I can stay, at the most, ten minutes longer," he announced.

Van Langenberg sighed. Opening his drawer, he produced a cheque-book, and, after making a few rapid calculations, wrote quickly. Then, tearing off the cheque, he pushed it fretfully to the corner of the desk. The "commercial" stretched out a hand for the cheque, glanced at it, then folded it up and tucked it into a pocket of his waistcoat.

"I shall present this to-morrow afternoon," he said, standing up. "You had better notify the bank first thing in the morning."

It is curious; but he seemed to have absolute confidence that the cheque would be met. The Ziegelstraat would have jeered at him for a gullible fool.

Van Langenberg nodded assent and rose from his chair. "Now we will drink lager," he said,

in his every-day, pleasant voice. "No? A German—and not drink lager? But we part friends, hey? You will come again? Yes, we will do good business together."

"Yes, I will come again," the other agreed decisively. With a wave of his arm he indicated his samples littered about on the floor. "I shall leave the trunk and those things," he added; "they might attract notice in an empty street."

Van Langenberg nodded. "Attention!" he said sharply. "Before you come again, you will write to me—just an ordinary business letter about anything. But you will put a small cross in the bottom left-hand corner. Two days after the date in your letter, at ten o'clock at night sharp, I shall look through the little window behind you into the alley which runs down to the canal. And if I hear a cough—like this—so—I will find a way to let you in. You understand? Very well. Now I will tell you; I have changed my mind. I like you. You are wonderful. We will do big—very big business together. Now, go; and remember to come again."

His face beaming with pleasure, the Dutchman tripped to the door, opened it, and conducted the "commercial" downstairs and into the street.

A few moments later Van Langenberg hurried

back to his sanctum, ran to the window over the Ziegelstraat and, getting behind the curtain, watched his visitor's ungainly figure stumbling away over the cobble-stones.

When the man had gone out of sight, Van Langenberg came and stood by the desk, tapping restlessly upon it with his fingers and staring at the array of valuable articles he had purchased. His face was very serious.

"Ten thousand million devils!" he muttered. "They are the same. To-night I have paid a second time for them.

"Gott in Himmel! Why did I not put a bullet through him, like that police spy, Manton? Ach! but he is not a spy, this one. But who told him of this place? There is not one of our clients in 'klink'—no, not one. He lied to me. I do not like it. He reminds me of some one. Ach! who is it he reminds me of? He beat me. I, Van Langenberg, have been spiflicated. But he will come again, and then we shall see."

Suddenly the Dutchman found humour in the situation. "But there is another who has been spiflicated!" he exclaimed, striking the desk with his fist.

"He is not laughing now, I wager. He must return here. I must send a cable to him. Ach!

but it is funny—very funny. . . . And now I have made myself thirsty, and will go upstairs and drink lager."

He extinguished the light, and, picking his way across the room like a cat in the dark, he proceeded through the door in the angle and went up to his private apartments.

As a matter of chronological interest, it may be stated, while Van Langenberg in Rotterdam was quenching his thirst in his favourite beverage, in Paris a certain rosy-cheeked little police agent was perpetrating one of his harmless little inaccuracies.

"Monsieur," he was saying to his chief, "I should be deeply grateful for leave of absence."

"Why?"

"My health has not been quite as I could desire of late." M. Faverol sighed very creditably, and strove to appear dejected.

His chief gave him a sharp look. He was an overworked man, and he had no use for subtlety. "Sit down," he said curtly. "I have something to say to you. We can return to the subject of your—er—health later. I have been trying to balance the merits of two men—yourself and M. Lavigne.

"Your appearance here is fortunate, for it has

decided me. You are a little younger than Lavigne, and I understand even he has not a more extensive knowledge of the features, habits, and present whereabouts of most of the big thieves of the Continent and England than yourself."

Faverol bowed. It was said he could achieve a graceful bow kneeling, even.

"You know, of course," his chief went on, "that though we succeed very often in laying these fellows by the heels, we fail in many cases, and those the most important. Take the case of those three paintings stolen from the Louvre about a year ago——"

"'English Harry,'" observed Faverol.

"Precisely. I have been told so. But we have never been able to prove it. And he is living at ease in——"

"In Jermyn Street, London."

"Precisely; and yet we cannot touch him. Then there was the English affair—the Polignac necklace, stolen from the Duchess of Belward, after she came away from the State ball. I understand Scotland Yard suspects a Frenchman of that; but in this case also we are stalemated. You play chess? Very well, then you understand.

"In these two unsatisfactory cases, as in many others equally unsatisfactory, and extending back

over a dozen years, we have, perhaps, been able to point to the perpetrators of the robberies, we have even brought some of them to justice; but we have failed to recover the stolen property.

"Running through all our success there is an undercurrent of failure," continued the chief. "I speak, as it were, for the police of Europe.

"Others and myself have often discussed this and we have long been of the opinion that the property never recovered has passed through the hands of one man, or, it may be, two acting in partnership. Everything points to an astoundingly clever organisation, which—er—baffles us completely. Possibly you have heard whispers on this very subject? Yes? Then we can now return to your health."

"Monsieur, my health is excellent," said Faverol.

"Indeed? You have made a quick recovery."

"Thanks to Monsieur. But, if I may explain, I should have spoken more openly. Since the affair of the Bêche Noire, I am not popular in certain quarters, Monsieur. Many things came out at the trial of the porter who set the café in a blaze which were better kept quiet. And I think—seriously, Monsieur—my health would be benefited by leave of absence for several months."

"You! a timid man?"

"Monsieur has my record. It is not that of a coward. I would merely run away to fight again." It is to be feared Faverol was again suppressing the exact truth.

"H'm. Perhaps you are right. But I warn you the work I propose giving you is likely to be extremely dangerous.—You knew Manton?"

"Intimately, Monsieur. We often collaborated."

"H'm. Have you any idea what has become of him?"

"I have not seen him for a twelvemonth, Monsieur. His disappearance has caused us—his colleagues—much perplexity."

The big man looked gloomy. "I fear he is dead. We set him the same task as——"

"I am not afraid, Monsieur," Faverol interrupted quietly.

"Good. Then these are your instructions: You are to discover the organisation I spoke about just now.—Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, Monsieur."

"It is vague in the extreme," his chief went on in almost petulant tones, "but in one way, perhaps, poor Manton's fate may afford a clue. It is the only assistance I can give you. Soon after the Louvre affair a body was found floating in a canal

in Rotterdam. It had a bullet wound through the heart. From information sent us, we have reason to believe that body was Manton's. Therefore, go to Rotterdam. You speak Dutch?"

"Yes, Monsieur." Faverol had a smattering of several European languages, but he spoke not only Dutch, but English, fluently. He had learned the value of study early, for he was an ambitious little man.

"Have I *carte blanche?*" he inquired.

His chief nodded. "You can regard yourself as being on leave—indefinitely," he said in a tired voice. "Money you can obtain through the usual channels. That will do. And good luck go with you!" He held out his hand for Faverol to shake. It was a signal honour.

Faverol bowed himself out, blushing.

"Phoo!" he observed to himself, as he tripped down the stairs, "this organisation affair is a mare's nest. But I have no objection to a little jaunt to Rotterdam—by way of England."

He was justified in feeling elated. Who would not be, with indefinite leave and all expenses paid? He glanced at his watch. It was eleven o'clock.

About that time, in a certain country house in England, a somewhat dull-witted, time-expired

soldier-man was beginning to account to his master for a depleted treasure chamber. Unlike Van Langenberg, Sebastien Gautil was quite unable to find the slightest humour in the situation.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PARTNERS

SUNDAY night; and the Ziegelstraat desolate in pouring rain, its cobble-stones gleaming with an unwonted cleanliness in the wan light of the sparsely distributed street lamps. Opposite Van Langenberg's office a drain had become clogged; and an extensive pool, fed by the dirty yellow rivulets purling along in the gutters, overflowed steadily down the little alley leading to the canal.

Just as a neighbouring clock proclaimed the hour of nine, a man, enveloped in glistening black oilskins, sou'wester, and rubber knee-boots, turned swiftly into the Ziegelstraat at its western end. He strode along at a great pace, and, coming to the pool, without pausing to consider its depth, splashed deliberately through, and disappeared into the gloom of the alley.

After proceeding a few yards he stopped, and, looking up towards Van Langenberg's little window, coughed once; then twice, quickly. Then he

walked on leisurely, until his hand, feeling along the right wall, rested upon a door.

Fifteen years ago the door had been a side entrance leading, by means of a narrow flight of stairs, to the first floor of the warehouse; but Van Langenberg, on embarking upon his shipping agency business, with considerable ostentation had the stair-head bricked up and the alley door barred, apparently for ever. Nevertheless, hardly had the stranger touched it when the door opened inwards noiselessly. At once he slipped through into the pitch blackness inside, turned to the right, and mounted without hesitation, taking the precaution, however, to count the stairs.

A wise precaution, for the seventh step was missing altogether, leaving a gap which must inevitably have proved disastrous to the ignorant or unwary.

On reaching the blank wall at the top the stranger turned to the left, and with outstretched hands took four paces into Van Langenberg's sanctum. Finding the edge of the desk, he stood perfectly still, as if he knew what was expected of him. Presently some one followed him into the room. There was the quiet click of a well-oiled spring lock; then suddenly, from the direction of the glass-fronted cupboard, the rays from a bull's

eye lantern sought for and rested inquiringly upon his face.

"Good!" said the voice of Van Langenberg, in tones of cheerful satisfaction. The light travelled across the room and fell upon a couple of hooks on the door leading to the clerk's office on the ground floor. "Hang your wet oilskins up there," Van Langenberg went on volubly. "Ach! what a terrible night! But very convenient, hey? Your boots, too; they are better left down here; so wet! They would spoil my carpet. I will provide slippers. Good! Beware of those cases. Now we will go up to the warmth, where there is coffee and a little excellent cognac, all ready. Ach! what a night!"

Chattering unceasingly, he opened the door in the angle of the wall, and, preceded by his silent visitor, ascended a curving flight of stairs and passed through yet another door at the top into his private apartment.

Contrary to the opinion of the Ziegelstraat, there was little of the squalid garret in Van Langenberg's private quarters. One room only—but what a room! Incongruous astonishing, luxurious.

Mingling with the fragrance of tobacco smoke (which spoke volumes for Van Langenberg's taste in cigars) an appetising odour of coffee emanated

from a dilapidated old pot perched upon an anthracite stove occupying the centre of the apartment.

Two very deep, comfortable-looking red-leather arm-chairs had been drawn up near the stove; and, between them, a low octagonal inlaid table, of Eastern origin, bore two dainty china cups and saucers, liqueur glasses with peculiar opaque stems, a remarkably handsome cut-glass brandy decanter, and a cedarwood cabinet containing cigars and cigarettes.

In incongruous juxtaposition with these was a common, "sleever" tumbler, which exhibited traces of having recently been used for the consumption of beer. A tall brass standard lamp stood behind the chairs, its light pleasantly diffused by a dark green silk shade. The carpet was a superb Turkey, with an extremely heavy pile. Nevertheless, a square had been wantonly cut from it in the way of the stove.

A Japanese screen concealed a couch evidently used as a bed, at the head of which was a large steel safe; at the foot, a low, carved oak press. Tapestries draped the four walls completely, and hid from view the one window which overlooked the canal.

Van Langenberg's visitor went straight to the stove, and having half filled a cup with coffee, flooded it with brandy. Then, lighting a cigar he

sank heavily into the nearest chair and stretched out his stockinged feet to the warmth.

He was a tall man, inclined to stoutness of the flabby kind. His face, puzzling, but not altogether unprepossessing, was spoilt by an over-full jet-black beard and moustache, which a close inspection would have proved to be false. He had that heavy, dull appearance which occasionally conceals a very powerful brain. The skin was sallow. His hands were the worst part of him; some hyper-sensitive people would have said that the thumbs made them shudder. Now that he had discarded his oilskins, his garb was of the kind that, rightly or wrongly, one is apt to associate with Nonconformity and a conscience. In age he might have been forty-five.

As he leant back, alternately sipping his coffee and smoking, and staring straight in front of him at nothing, he appeared to be in a disturbed and rather bad-tempered frame of mind; and he was barely civil to Van Langenberg when that cheerful robin of a man brought him a pair of capacious fur-lined "foot-cosies."

His visitor's behaviour seemed to be causing the little Dutchman no little amusement. He grinned covertly as he chose a cigar with great care. Settling himself comfortably in the vacant chair,

for a few moments he blew smoke rings, lost in a quizzical contemplation of the ceiling, which, to be truthful, was a reproach to the rest of the room, for it sadly needed a coat of whitewash. At last, however, the continued silence of his companion seemed to irritate him.

"Well," Van Langenberg began pertly, in French: "So you received my cable concerning the shipment of Bols—and you are here. *Peste!* but are you not curious to learn why I sent for you? Ach!" he went on, relapsing into his own language, "I have known you, now, for—Gott! I forget how long—certainly we have been partners for fifteen years. But still you are a mystery to me."

"Bah!" growled the other, "leave out that nonsense. Come to business. And say what you have got to say in French. I hate your Dutch lingo. And when you have finished," he added grimly, "I will tell you something—very unpleasant, too."

Van Langenberg grunted. "So!" he mimicked; "very unpleasant, hey? Well, my news also is very unpleasant. But I laugh—before you arrive. Perhaps I can guess your news," he burst out suddenly, raising his head and peering sideways at his visitor. "Now you have arrived, I cannot laugh. It is a pity. Therefore, tell me your

news first, and I will put the cap on it. And because it is funny, we will then laugh together and become more sociable."

Receiving no answer, the Dutchman leaned over the arm of his chair. "Have you disposed of any of the 'stuff' you took away from here last time?" he inquired, with a jeering grin of triumph on his face.

"What the deuce do you mean by that?" returned the other, jerking himself upright and glaring at Van Langenberg.

"So! Then it was stolen from you. I was right. It is funny. Well, partner, your carelessness has cost us—three—thousand—English—guineas! And, now, you can guess why I sent for you." He sat well back in his chair and smoked furiously.

A quick look of astounded comprehension swept over his partner's face. "They brought it to you?" he almost shouted.

Van Langenberg nodded and made a slight correction: "He brought it to me."

"He! Who? Who brought it to you? Why the deuce can't you speak plainly?"

"I do not know who he was. I wish I did. I want to know very badly."

"*Diable!* A stranger! How in the fiend's name does a stranger know of this place?"

"I want to know that, also," Van Langenberg replied, with an airy flourish of his cigar. "But let us begin at the very beginning—at, shall we call it, the robbery, hey? What do you know about that?"

"Nothing."

"What! Nothing?" the Dutchman interrupted chuckling. "Hein! but it is funny. We are good partners. We both know nothing. No wonder we succeed."

"Nothing," continued his partner savagely, disregarding the interruption. "Except that when I got—when I got to the place where I keep my portion of the stuff it had been ransacked. The most valuable things, the most easily carried off, had gone—disappeared."

"Be precise. What had gone?"

"In detail?"

"Of course. *Glück!* but we must see if they have all come back to us, must we not?"

"Teh! fetch them out, then. You have got them, you say."

"I did not say so," Van Langenberg retorted. "I have sent some away already; the rest are packed ready to go in the cases. It is possible, the sooner we get rid of them the better."

"You fear a visit? The police?"

"That, too, is possible; but I do not think so. I will explain to you why presently. Go on with the list and I will tick them off on my fingers."

"The three Louvre pictures—English Harry's lot," his partner began.

"Three."

"The Polignac necklace; those four snuff-boxes; two miniatures; nine rings—the Anstruther Collection haul."

"Nineteen."

"Four jewel-cases; a dozen more rings—part of the Vienna hotel lot."

"Thirty-five."

"Two and a half pairs diamonded buckles—they left the odd one, which I believe is paste; and eleven pieces of porcelain—from various sources. But they were the pick of the whole lot I had."

"Forty-nine," Van Langenberg reckoned up.

"That is all," said his partner.

"Yes. That is all. I had forty-nine. Now!" the Dutchman inquired anxiously, "who knows of this robbery—outside yourself, myself, and the man who brought the things to me?"

"As far as I know, no one," his partner replied, stretching out a hand for the coffee-pot. He did not meet Van Langenberg's gaze.

"So! Then it was done well—no fuss—no noise? The things, they just vanished, hey?"

The other nodded. "Only the very smartest at the business could have done it so cleanly," he said, between sips of coffee. "Not a scratch—not a mark left anywhere. Except for the empty picture frames you could have sworn no one had been in the room."

"Frames! You kept the pictures in frames!" Van Langenberg protested, his eyes opening to their fullest extent. "Are you mad?"

"Bah! Call them 'copies,' and who looks twice at them? But none of that, Langenberg. You know the rules. No interference. Each manages his side of the business in his own way."

"You managed yours well, hey?"

"Keep your temper. Bickering will do no good—to you certainly; you get stouter; you drink too much. The things were taken; and that's an end of it, as far as I am concerned. But it is very serious; very. Tell me about the fellow who brought the stuff to you."

Van Langenberg scowled at his cigar, pitched it into the stove, and lighted another with a finicky slowness that was evidently intended to be exasperating. But his partner took absolutely no notice; and presently the Dutchman began.

"Yes. It is serious. I laughed at your being robbed and the stuff brought a second time to me, because it is funny—very funny. It is a very good thing there is something in the affair to laugh at. Just listen to me!" he went on, with sudden vehemence, swinging round in his chair. "I will tell you something which is not funny. No! not one jot of it! . . . Some time ago, a few days after you were here, a fellow poked himself into my office downstairs. He said he was a German 'traveller'—in ledgers and stationery. But he was not a German. No! Though he was a good imitation—very good. When we were alone in my private office my German says to me: 'You were not always in the wine and spirit shipping. You used to deal in other things, providing they were of value—and had been lost. You would buy the Kohinoor if I brought to you.' He spoke just like that: and mark you his use of the past tense," Van Langenberg put in.

"Now, I was curious about this fellow, because I did not know him. I was rude to him just as I know how. But, as I waved my hands about, I made the old sign—one I used before we became partners. I did it—like this—carelessly—it might have been just a chance. He answered it. I was astonished. But I took no notice; and I told him

I wanted no ledgers—or anything; and, if I did, I would not buy it from a fool who came and talked nonsense that I could not understand.

"He went away without a word; and I thought I had done with him. He looked afraid, as if he had made a mistake. But, no! Two days ago, just as my clerk was going to put up the shutters, I heard some one come in and begin to argue. I listened; then I went downstairs; and there was my German with a trunk—a big one—I have burnt it since. I was angry; but I sent my clerk home to his wife, and I brought the other man up to my office. I did not know what to think; but I meant to find out something—or that German was going to find himself spiflicated with a bullet. I tell you I found out nothing. He was not a spy, like that Manton. I thought he was so—at first. But, no! I can smell a police agent.

"This man was in the business—genuine—what the English call a 'swell mobsman.' He said he had heard of me in 'klink'! Boof! A lie! Remember what I said to you about his using the past tense. He knew of me years ago. But I forget none of the old ones. But who is he? I do not know. I do not like it. And I do not like him. He has robbed us of three thousand English guineas. Well; that I do not mind.

Why? Because when he finds he has no trouble in obtaining the money, he will come again, as I asked him. Yes! He will come once more. After that he will not be a German—or anything else—and he can take his guineas to bribe Old Nick to give him a cool place!

"Now I have made myself thirsty, so I will drink lager. That brandy will not fill a hollow tooth—which I have got in my jaws. No!"

Van Langenberg sprang to his feet and, running behind the screen, emerged presently grasping by their necks six bottles of beer, three in each hand. The Dutchman's cellar was easy of access. Did he wake in the night, thirsty, he had merely to lean out and thrust a hand under the couch.

His partner watched his movements with dull eyes. "What was this German like?" he asked, after a short silence.

"Like!" snorted Van Langenberg, clinking the neck of an opened bottle against the tumbler. "Like! Like nothing—like anything. Young? Old? I do not know. His father the devil on two sticks knows"—he gulped down the beer at a draught—"beard and moustache—his own. Middle height; thick; strong hands—very; walked so."

Van Langenberg hunched his shoulders and gave

a distinctly clever imitation of the "German traveller's" gait. "But it is no good," he added; "it was all just play-acting."

For a long time there was silence. The stove began to roar, and Van Langenberg adjusted the draw-plate with his foot. Then, having consumed a second bottle of beer, he came and stood opposite his partner.

"Now I have had some lager," he remarked, peering into his empty glass, "I feel better; and I will tell you something. That German—do you know who he reminded me of? No? *Peste!* you are silent to-night, partner. Never mind. I will do the talking. Swallow this," he blurted out, raising his glance swiftly. "He reminded me of . . . André Gaspard!"

"Bah!" ejaculated his partner. But, nevertheless, his hand shook, as he fumbled his cigar somehow between his teeth. "Bah!" he repeated. "He is as good as—as mutton by now. A man is not a man after twenty years of—of out there."

"No," Van Langenberg retorted, in a huff; "perhaps he is a devil. You say 'Bah!' but you are shaking in your skin at the very name of Gaspard. I do not say 'Bah!' but I shake for no one. That is the difference.

"But if I had done what you did for Gaspard—

and the other two—then, perhaps, I should shake. Yes, for I believe Gaspard is capable of escaping from New Caledonia after fifty years of it.

"And when he comes he will bring his two slaves —the man who called himself Kit Polliter, and Jean, who was always to us 'the Rat.' And you will be lucky if 'the Rat' is the first to find you; for he will kill you quick—not just split your little finger again with his knife. Polliter—boof! He was 'nothing.' But that Gaspard! Yes—you just pray 'the Rat' comes first. So I give you the warning, friend Courtois. Swallow it, or choke over it—please yourself. You make me angry, you! And I say more than I mean. But with your bah, bah, bah! you make me sick."

Fuming with rage, Van Langenberg pivoted round, and made a savage onslaught on another bottle. Then he flung himself into his chair again.

"What do you make of it?" the tall man asked calmly, after a long silence.

"What do you make of it?" rapped back Van Langenberg.

His partner emitted two or three dense clouds of smoke, then: "It only makes me come a little sooner than I intended—to a decision I have had in my mind for some time past," he said slowly.

"Ach! Decisions—always your decisions!"

"We must give up the—business. There has been a leak somewhere. It had to come. But we cannot afford to disregard it. It breaks our run of success. As for your suggestion"—he paused—"I do not believe"—again he paused—"I mean your suggestion about Gaspard is nonsense, sheer nonsense." His words seemed to come with extreme difficulty.

Van Langenberg grunted; but as his next words proved, it was evident that he was not only relieved by what his partner had said, but was weather-cocking round to good humour again. Perhaps, each having the same solution of the difficulty in his mind, each had hesitated to propose it, each fearing how the momentous proposal of a dissolution of partnership would be received.

"So you think that," Van Langenberg said at last. "Very good. But as to going out of business, I agree. It was one of the reasons why I sent for you. So we agree—as we always do—in the end. Therefore we have succeeded.

"It has been a long run," he went on reminiscently, "and lucky. Do you remember how that fop of a fellow Gaspard used to prate of luck? Himmel! he made me sick. Well, his luck, with a little assistance from you, hey? took him to the other side of the world. Perhaps it passed to us.

But I am getting tired of it. It has been a good game, and an easy one to win. I could roll on my carpet and hurt myself with laughing when I think how we have fooled the police of all Europe.

"Sometimes, when I have been drinking up here all by myself, I tell myself it would be funny to go to that old mule in Paris, who sent that Manton to ferret us out, and to offer to put him on the track of all our clients. I would do it, if I wanted money. But no, I will retire—vanish into obscurity—boof!—grow a beard and make myself ugly. Hey?" The Dutchman grinned broadly.

His partner raised his head and looked Van Langenberg steadily in the eyes. "When we split," he said with emphasis, "it is for always—we never meet again."

"Tah-de-ti-do!" Van Langenberg replied, with flippant rudeness. "You need have no fear of me sitting in your pocket. I will not bite your ankles. Besides, you are not so pleasant in your manner as to make me want your company.

"In business it is different; I wanted your brains, and you wanted mine. Ach!" he burst out with a sudden recurrence of fury. "Why will you always take me for a fool? Have I ever been inquisitive of your private affairs?

"Outside our partnership, what do I know of

you, Hippolyte Courtois? Just this: In London you are Arthur Allerton, who lends money. I must know that, because it is necessary sometimes for me to communicate with you. But for the rest —where you live—married or single—nothing! And it would be easy to find out. But I do not want to.

"Why? Because I keep the rules ; and because I am not a fool. And now, because I am angry once more, I will tell you another reason why we should separate. It is just this. I think your brains are cracking. You have been beaten—spiflicated."

"So have you, Langenberg." It was a plain statement of fact, made without rancour. Doubtless the Dutchman's partner was accustomed to these voluble diatribes. "So have you," he repeated, and smiled for the first time, almost indulgently. He took a cigarette, and tapped it upon his thumbnail.

Van Langenberg's round eyes glittered; then, with a grunt, he stretched out a hand for more beer. His manner of imbibing was not edifying; it erred on the side of noisiness, and he had a regrettable habit of wiping his lips upon his sleeve.

"Hang!" he observed. "You interrupted me.

Well, it is always the same. I lose my temper, you find yours; I laugh, and you are sour. . . . Very well. So was I spiflicated. Perhaps my brains are cracking, too. I said I was getting tired.

"But I will tell you this. Before they crack, I shall crack the brains of the man who beat me. If I have to wait here until I rot, I will wait for that seller of ledgers to return. And I shall say to him, 'You are the devil, or, perhaps, you are his son, André Gaspard. I do not care. But because I do not like you'—bang, boof! I shall shoot him dead."

"Please yourself about that," his partner said indifferently, consulting his watch, which was a cheap one of the type vulgarly described as a "turnip." "It is getting late. Are we agreed, definitely, about dissolving partnership?"

"Yes"—sulkily.

"When? The sooner the better, to my mind."

"When we have disposed of the stuff in hand."

"You know of nothing more likely to come in?"

"No."

"Better accept no more."

"Of course not."

"Very well. Do you want me to take anything back with me?"

"You might be robbed again," Van Langenberg sneered.

His partner took no notice. "I will get rid of all the 'dangerous' stuff I have in my charge," he continued, "there is not much. And you will do the same with your lot. A month to-day I shall return, at the usual time, and will finally square accounts. If for any reason I find I must come sooner, I will communicate in the usual way. Is that understood?"

Van Langenberg nodded.

"And if you think it fair," the other added, rising to his feet and flinging away his cigarette end, "you can deduct what is right for my—well—carelessness."

"No!" Van Langenberg jerked out. "No. We are partners. I stand to share all risks—or mistakes. Besides," he muttered, staring at the stove, "I was beaten—I, Van Langenberg, was beaten, also." He glanced at his partner with a quaint expression of—was it maudlin?—contrition in his eyes. "I have been worried," he said gruffly. "For the first time in my life. And it has made me get angry—truly angry—not play-acting. And, I drink too much lager."

His partner walked slowly round the room. "I do not wish to be inquisitive," he remarked,

coming to a halt behind Van Langenberg's chair; "but when you go, what shall you do with all this? Some of it is valuable, though difficult to get rid of quietly."

Van Langenberg chuckled. He had drunk himself into permanent good humour. "Let them stop," he replied, without turning round. "They are all honest; therefore I can afford to lose them. They will give me a good character, and astonish the fools in the Ziegelstraat. When I go," he rattled on, addressing the ceiling, "every one shall know it. You must tell the world something of yourself, or it will find out more than you bargain for. I have always told them plenty, so they learn nothing.

"When I drink I become a philosopher. Just listen to my plan. I will make you laugh, and then we will take one drink together, and you shall go. There will come a time when Van Langenberg is not seen, perhaps for a day, perhaps for longer.

"Then my clerk shakes his silly head and tells every one. And by-and-by they all come upstairs whispering together, and they find a letter on the desk and the trap-door wide open.

"Ach! very sad. And the Ziegelstraat wags its silly head. 'Poor old Van Langenberg,' they will say; 'he drank too much lager.' But when

they come up here, it will be: 'Hein! the old miser!' And they will drag the canal, and find—nothing!—except, perhaps, that police spy, Manton, and the man who insists on selling me ledgers. And, in case he is that Gaspard—come, partner! We must drink to that——"

Van Langenberg slewed round, expecting to see his partner standing behind his chair—"Ach! where are you? Wait! I will come. What an unsociable fellow!"

The little Dutchman lurched to his feet, and stumbled down the stairs after his partner, who was already putting on his oilskins in the office below. Not another word passed between them. More than half-intoxicated as he was, Van Langenberg relaxed none of the usual precautions; rather, he exaggerated them.

A few moments later he let the man whom he had called by the name of Hippolyte Courtois out into the alley and the pouring rain. Then he went back to his private apartment, shaking his head with a sadness born of brandy followed by too much lager beer.

CHAPTER IX

THE PICNIC ON THE ISLAND

WARM, yet not too bright, the blue of the sky subdued, as it were, by a film of indeterminate cloud; from an angler's point of view, the afternoon was almost perfect. Numberless late "duns," with tiny, upright, gauze wings, floated down the river, and the greedy glop, glop of freely rising fish was enough to set any fly-fisherman's forearm tingling with anticipation.

But as he pulled his boat steadily up reach after reach, Trevor Wyer appeared to have no inclination even to thread the line through the rings of the rod resting at an angle against the rail of the stern seat. His thoughts were elsewhere; his mood was unusually reflective.

In a hazy sort of way he was just conscious that his pipe was going well, and that to keep the old warped boat straight entailed a slightly stronger stroke with the right scull than with the left; also he felt a trifle lonely, a state of mind he

had of late, to his surprise, experienced more than once.

Lonely!—near running water with a rod to his hand!

Chronic and, perhaps, cynically inclined anglers will recognise the symptoms. They are sadly lacking in normal experiences if they do not.

"Poor chap!" one can imagine these wiseacres saying, wagging commiserating noddles. "We went through it ourselves. Well, pink sun-bonnets come to most of us but once in a lifetime. Trout and grayling come every year—thank heaven!"

On rounding Folley corner Wyer heard a loud shout, and, looking back over his shoulder, he beheld Farmer Pountney, a burly old man in voluminous clay-coloured tweeds and gaiters to match, leaning against a huge dead oak on the far bank.

The oak formed a boundary mark of Pountney's land, where it extended down to the river. A small, awkwardly placed property, Penny Farm stretched in a narrow strip right up to the high ridge, the farm buildings themselves being tucked away behind the belt of copse running along the river bank.

It was common knowledge that old Pountney,

the present owner, found it extremely difficult to keep a balance on the peace-of-mind side of his banking account. Years ago Penny Farm had formed part of the Janesford estate; and the remembrance, somehow, caused no love to be lost between Pountney and Lord Janesford.

But then, from the day his young wife died, his lordship had no particular fondness for any one. It is in the nature of some people to bear a perpetual grudge against the world on account of their own private grief.

Wyer sculled rapidly across the river and gave the old man a hearty greeting. The feud had not descended to the Hon. Trevor; indeed, like all healthy minded people, he preferred friendships to enmities—a characteristic in part responsible, no doubt, for his father's oft-repeated indictments of his son's "democratic notions."

"I'm middlin', sir, thank 'ee," Pountney responded. "Like a good many more, none the better for bein' born too soon, p'raps. Sport, sir?"

"Haven't wet a line," Wyer replied guiltily.

"H'm. Not heedin' the trout, maybe. After the grayling, then, sir?"

"I might have a go at them later; but I don't think they're on the shallows yet."

The farmer appeared unconvinced, and a net-

work of humorous wrinkles showed themselves around his eyes.

"Put a maggot on your fly," he suggested, "and I reckon you'll find 'em right enough, sir."

"Maggot! You old poacher!" laughed Wyer.

"Poachin' or no, it's the way to fill the pot, sir."

"You're always thinking of the pot."

"Can't see no use in fishin' if I don't," the farmer retorted. "But talkin' of poachin' reminds me of what I wanted to tell you. Got many 'birds' your side this time, sir?"

"About the usual, I fancy," Wyer replied. "Few and wild. Not that I mind that much. I can't stick shooting hand-fed birds."

"Well, I'm with you there, sir—pot or no pot," agreed the farmer. "But they'll be few enough," he added. "My cowman—he lives your side—crossed in the punt a bit above, he tells me, last Thursday night, was it? Aye, we'd been up with a sick cow. Well, he co't sight of a chap as he was goin' home in your woods by Seckley—a little feller, poacher all over him. I thought I'd best let you know."

"Thanks. A little man, did you say?"

"Ay. A weasly little snitch of a feller, my cowman said."

"That's queer. On Thursday night a little chap

ran across the road in front of my mare up by the lodge gates. Nearly frightened the seven senses out of her."

"Did 'ee, sir? I'll back it's the idensical varmint. Well, if I ketch holt on him on my side of Severn I shan't trouble the 'beaks.' I'll stop his poachin', or my name ain't Poun'ey."

The old man struck the trunk of the oak a resounding thwack with his cudgel; he weighed somewhere about seventeen stone, and had a certain reputation for administering summary justice of his own.

Wyer had his own reasons for questioning the term "poacher" as applied to the little individual under discussion; but he let the subject drop.

"By the way," he said, "I hope you didn't mind my sending you a lodger."

"Mind! Master Trevor," Pountney replied, bluntly enough, though the farmer's change to the personal note of address was significant. "Mind? Thirty-five shillin' a week's not to be sneezed at these days."

"That's all right, then. Hope things will go on satisfactorily."

"Right enough, I reckon. I don't see much of the lady myself, but the missus says, 'She'll do.' No trouble hardly, quiet, and the dog likes her.

Out walkin', or drivin', or sum'mat, with the folk at the Cottage, most days.

"And that reminds me. As I come down from Ardley half an hour or more back, I see'd Mrs. Gautil and our lodger startin' out in a boat. Picnicking, I reckon, on the island. The Cottage folk often has their tea there. Can't see much sense in havin' tea out on the grass, myself; but I suppose folks has to have diff'rent notions in this world.

"But I'm keepin' you, sir. Maybe you're goin' up to join 'em." His eyes twinkled. The absence of fish in the boat and the significance of Wyer's unusually spick-and-span appearance were not lost upon the old man. Besides, gossip already had been busy.

The countryside was promising to itself a species of excitement it loved even more than a funeral: a match between a young man who was a favourite, and a maid, who, if she were a "furriner," was as "pretty as a posy."

"Well, I wasn't invited," Wyer replied innocently. "But now you mention it, a cup of tea wouldn't come amiss; so I'll get along on the chance of getting one."

Pountney nodded gravely, and turned and looked about him. "Hi! Tizzy, Tizzy!" he

called out. "Where's that blessed dog of mine got to?" Whistling loudly, and flourishing his great cudgel, the old man strode away; but after taking a few strides, as if an afterthought had suddenly struck him, he stopped just long enough to call out over his shoulder with a poor attempt at carelessness: "You'll find the young leddy on th' island, Master Trevor." Then he departed, chuckling to himself.

"Counfound the old ass!" Wyer thought. "What the deuce does he mean by that?" He dug the sculls viciously into the unoffending water. "What does it matter to me if I do?"

He was curiously annoyed by Pountney's last remark, and, after a few vigorous strokes, he eased up, half-inclined to turn the boat round and go home. He asked himself why he had come on the river at all; and when Obstinacy prompted the answer, "To fish," Wyer knew instinctively that it was less than a half-truth.

While still debating with himself, he began mechanically to pull on up-stream, and for some inexplicable reason called himself a fool for so doing.

The island mentioned by Farmer Pountney lay some two hundred yards above the ford, the scene of Trevor Wyer's first meeting with Celeste Gautil.

The lower end, set slightly askew across the river, was composed of high, steep banks fringed with tall willows enclosing a kind of miniature table-land all covered with spongy moss-turf.

An ideally secluded spot for a picnic; and there was a window-like gap between the willows at the point (where one of the trees had been bent sideways by a flood and left lying aslant against its neighbour), which afforded a most delightful peep down the river valley, with the possible advantage that the observer could see without being seen.

The upper half of the island sloped abruptly down to a shingle bed, affording the one practicable landing-place for boating parties. Here, when the river was fairly low, it was possible to wade across from the left bank to the island.

Having surmounted the long ford, Wyer pulled on without turning his head. Undecided for a few moments which side of the island to take, he miscalculated his position, and when he did attempt to slew the boat into the left channel he succeeded in running aground under the willows at the point. A merry laugh above and behind him greeted this unwonted display of lubberliness.

Charitably, Wyer's remark might have been construed into a mere boyish "Dash!" He looked around; and almost immediately looked away

again and began fidgeting uselessly with his sculls, as if to back the boat off into deeper water. He had an unaccountable feeling of dismay—that is, if dismay may be applied to a sensation which certainly is not unwelcome!

A short time ago he had asked himself indignantly, "What does it matter to me if I do find her on the island?" And, now, a momentary vision of a laughing face, set in pink, and framed, as it were, in the delicate greenery of the willows, brought Wyer his answer. It mattered a very great deal: it mattered everything.

Yet, conscious of this, all Wyer said to himself was: "Good heavens!"—and felt exceedingly shy.

Few men are the worse for shyness when first wounded by love. To most, and especially to men of Wyer's type, love comes as a shock, even when long foretold. For the little god is full of craftiness; he runs on tip-toe behind the hedge bordering the pathway of life, and flings gossamer after gossamer over the unsuspecting traveller.

Mesh by mesh the net is woven; then, when it is complete, suddenly the archer draws tight the folds and remorselessly fits an arrow to his bow-string. Not seldom he shoots hard, for he perceives there is armour to be pierced. But naught can withstand his tiny darts; not even the armour of self-

conceit, which, surely, is proof against all else. And when the little god shoots hard, he hurts. Sometimes the pain is brief, passing through wonder to the very perihelion of joy; sometimes the pain ceases only with—death.

Celeste Gautil broke the silence.

"We have been guessing who you were," she said. "I told Mother it was you." Then she added with just a touch of formality, as Wyer turned round again and faced her: "We are just going to have tea, and Mother sent me to ask you if you would accept a cup."

"Rather!" Wyer replied eagerly. "It is uncommonly kind of you."

"Uncommonly kind! But you must thank Mother, not me."

Before he could reply she had stepped back out of sight; but to his surprise, when a few minutes later he reached the landing-place at the top end of the island, he found the girl there waiting for him.

"I almost forgot," she began hurriedly. "I wanted to speak to you before you see Mother. She knows nothing about the other night—I mean——"

"The burglary that wasn't a burglary," Wyer put in, as he lifted the nose of the boat well on the shingle.

"Yes. I told Dad all about it, and he said I was quite right not to tell her. Mother is rather nervous over some things, you know."

Wyer nodded. "I say," he inquired with disconcerting directness, "have you forgiven me?"

"Forgiven you?"

"Well, you seemed"—he stooped to pick up his coat—"very angry with me that night."

"Angry! No, I wasn't. I think I was a—a little afraid——"

"Of me?"

"Oh, don't be stupid! You know what I mean perfectly well. And you were very cross."

"Cross! Who with?"

"Oh, at being found there in the dark, I suppose."

Wyer knew she did not suppose anything of the sort, but he laughed good-humouredly, and replied: "Well, it was enough to make any one feel a fool, wasn't it?"

"But it was Hatt's fault," Celeste said quickly, adding, rather stiffly, "Perhaps we all looked a little ridiculous."

"You certainly did not," Wyer said quietly. "I thought you looked——"

"Like a cheeky schoolgirl," she took him up, moving away; "and you tried to lecture me.

But come along, or the tea will be stewed; and I'm a perfect fad over my tea."

Wyer hastened after her, and together they walked slowly up the slope leading to the picnic spot.

"Mrs. Aubertin is with you, isn't she?" he asked.

"Yes. Mother is revelling in her society. I'm quite out in the cold. You see Dad never would let me learn French for some reason or another, and now Mother is working off what she calls her 'arrears' upon Mrs. Aubertin. But don't be alarmed; Mrs. Aubertin speaks English fluently when necessary."

"What a relief!" Wyer laughed. "I always barred French at school—the language, I mean——"

"Oh, I don't mind! I consider myself thoroughly English. And Mother is only half-French. Her mother was English, or rather Scotch. Is that too involved for you?"

"No. My thick skull can just take that in—but I always had an idea your father was French."

"No" — decidedly — "Dad's English. You should hear him on the subject. Did you know he had been home?—Oh! but how stupid of me. I practically told you that just now."

Wyer nodded. "I knew before," he said.

"Your father sent me a letter by Hatt the day he was at home. I'm sorry he had to go away again so soon. I want to meet him." A pause, then: "What hard luck about Boris!"

Celeste flashed round on him. "Hard luck?" she began in a low, indignant voice, while unshed tears glistened in her eyes. Then she broke off in some confusion as though she had nearly been surprised into saying something she particularly desired to keep secret, and walked quickly on ahead.

Her emphasis upon the word "luck" and a subtle change of manner were unmistakable. Wyer instantly divined that the girl did not regard Boris's extraordinary end in the light of an accident. Then, what was her real opinion concerning the burglary so explicitly denied by her father? Another and incredible thought struck Wyer: Was it possible that, in her mind, the slightest suspicion attached itself to him? His first impulse was to blurt out this question; he felt furious, and was furious with himself for feeling furious. But by now such a question was impossible, for they were within hearing distance of the elder ladies.

Mrs. Gautil gave Wyer a pleasant welcome. She liked him—quite well enough to allow complacently the intimacy, which she could not help

noticing had grown up between the young people, to develop itself in its own way. Trevor Wyer was not clever, nor likely ever to be wealthy; but no one who knew him could fail to discover the promise of a sterling manhood beneath his external boyishness. Mrs. Gautil had already determined to leave the result in Celeste's hands. During his recent brief home-coming Mrs. Gautil, in some trepidation, had broached the subject to her husband. To her surprise he had merely laughed and said he should not interfere, remarking, however, that a certain noble lord, a writer of vitriolic letters, would probably have a deal to say on the matter.

The little picnic was hardly a success. Mrs. Aubertin spoke but seldom; Celeste made no effort to keep up a conversation, merely answering questions and then relapsing into silence. When tea was over she busied herself packing away the paraphernalia of the tea-basket and refused Wyer's assistance with a manner that put a second offer entirely out of court. Mrs. Aubertin had already risen and was standing near the gap in the willows gazing down the river.

Wyer lit a cigarette and took the opportunity of apologising to Mrs. Gautil for not having paid his "dinner call," pleading, genuinely enough, an unusual pressure of work about the estate as an

excuse. Then the conversation turned upon his visit to London as George Heron's guest, and in answer to a casual inquiry from Mrs. Gautil, Wyer remarked that he had left his friend preparing to start for Vienna; but that Heron had promised to pay a second and longer visit to Janesford as soon as his affairs would allow.

"What is Mr. Heron?" Mrs. Gautil asked. "He has such an interesting face, I think he must have been through hardship in years gone by, and yet now he seems without a care in the world."

"I really don't know what he is," Wyer replied.

"Has Mr. Heron never told you?" Celeste broke in, glancing up from a process of grass-plucking which had appeared to absorb all her attention.

"No," Wyer said, with a slightly surprised air. "Why should he?"

"Well, one generally likes to know something of one's friends," Celeste retorted.

Mrs. Gautil, who had long divined an "atmosphere," smoothed matters with a suggestion.

"In some ways," she began, "Mr. Heron reminded me of men—the Colonials, I mean—whom I used to meet in Capetown. Though at times I could have declared he was French," she added, turning to Mrs. Aubertin, who at that moment

approached. "Mr. Heron dined with us one evening, and he sang simply charmingly an old French song—well, as only a Frenchman could have sung it. When he comes again we must ask him to sing it for your benefit. I am sure you will like it. Celeste, dear! What was the name of the song? Do you remember?"

For a moment or two Celeste hesitated, not from fault of memory, but because she remembered the song all two vividly. The words, being French, had no meaning for her, but she had been strangely disturbed by the air and Heron's remarkable rendering. At the recollection she felt her cheeks redden. Illogically enough, she feared lest Wyer experienced a similar perturbation; and now she dreaded meeting his glance. Her trepidation was quite unnecessary; for, it may be said, the song in question had merely given that somewhat prosaic young man a moment or two of self-consciousness (Wyer himself termed it "the fidgets") such as most Englishmen feel when hearing another man sing a sentimental song as though his whole soul were in the words and the music.

"Mr. Heron said it was his own composition," Celeste replied, with pronounced frigidity. "He called it—I think—'Ecoute.'" Then she rose abruptly and walked away.

At any other time the girl's behaviour would have provoked notice; but it so happened that no one was paying her any attention. Both her mother and Wyer were anxiously watching Mrs. Aubertin, who, after echoing the name of the song in a low voice, had grown very pale, and was palpably under the influence of some physical or emotional stress.

Wyer sprang to his feet and flung away his cigarette; he quite expected Mrs. Aubertin to faint; Mrs. Gautil rose more slowly.

"I think it has become a little chilly," she remarked, with the forgivable inaccuracy of tact, giving Wyer a meaning glance. Then, "Celeste, dear, will you help Mr. Wyer to carry the basket to the boat?"

There are some maternal tones, even from so mild a person as Mrs. Gautil, which brook no argument; and Celeste, while not understanding the reason for the command, and with obvious reluctance, came slowly back and grasped one of the handles of the tea-basket.

She did not speak on the way to the boats, and although he particularly desired to "have it out," Celeste's demeanour was so discouraging that Wyer also found himself tongue-tied, and when on arriving at the landing-place the girl walked away

and stood with her back to him, apparently enthralled by the sunlit vista of woodland and river up-stream, he, too, turned his back and busied himself with the boats. They were both relieved when the others joined them.

"Mrs. Aubertin thinks she would like to get back to the farm as quickly as possible," Mrs. Gautil said to Wyer; "would you please take her down in your boat and see her home?"

"Of course. I shall be delighted," Wyer answered, and set about borrowing cushions from the Gautils' luxuriously furnished boat to make his own old "utility" craft more comfortable. Without fuss he conducted the embarkation of the elder ladies; Celeste gave him no opportunity of assisting her, and he sought none. Wyer was not a man of sighs and beseeching glances—which, after all, are often but the hall-mark of the egotist. Besides, he was ruffled by Celeste's unaccountable change of mood. Having despatched the Gautils, for convenience sake Wyer pulled up-stream a few strokes, and let the boat drift down stern first on the quieter water of the narrow channel on the other side of the island.

Two thirds of the way down the channel Mrs. Aubertin uttered a low exclamation, and, following her gaze, Wyer perceived a fisherman, a plump,

rosy-cheeked, little fellow, sitting at the water's edge under the overhanging willows and just beneath the spot where the picnic party had tea. From above the man was completely hidden; but, unless he had been asleep (as, indeed, he appeared to be now), he must have overheard every word spoken. As the boat passed the angler opened his eyes, nodded, then grinned with a comical expression of guilt at being caught napping

"He quite startled me," Mrs. Aubertin excused herself, with a nervous laugh. "How—how did he get there?"

"Oh! waded across, I expect," Wyer replied soothingly, and promptly put his back into his work. His passenger looked as though she had seen, or expected to see, a ghost, and the sooner she was under Mrs. Pountney's motherly care the better.

When the boat had shot round the bend the fisherman lit a cigarette, after the manner of one who has been deprived of his petty vice for an undue length of time.

"Phoo!" he ejaculated, expelling a great cloud of smoke. "Now, did she recognise me—or did she expect me to be some one else? . . . And so that is Mme. Aubertin? . . . Here, perhaps, yes. But in Paris, no. If that is not the Vicomtesse X.

then I am not Henri Faverol. . . . Louis, you old fox! A thousand compliments to you, wherever you may be! Ha! ha! . . . And this M. George Heron; he has already paid a visit to this charming neighbourhood, and he is to return here shortly, when his business in Vienna permits. Indeed! And our young milord's son who lives such a lonely life in that dreary dog-hole of a château—he does not know the occupation of his friend. How strange! But Mme. Gautil fancies he is—er—Colonial. He, he! Very good, we will take a peep at M. George Heron and see what we make of him. Phoo!"

Deep in reflections such as these, M. Faverol took his fishing-rod to pieces, and having bestowed his tackle neatly among his various pockets he scrambled up through the willows to the little table-land. After roaming about for some considerable time he waded barefoot across the shingle ridge to the mainland, and set off leisurely on his long tramp back to Beaudelay, where for the past two days he had occupied humble lodgings in an outlying cottage.

Before he had gone halfway the sun sank below the wooded ridges behind him, and with remarkable suddenness the valley became enshrouded in sombre shadow. Eerily from the

water rose a chill autumn mist. Over the flat meadows of the Janesford Home Farm on the other side of the river, Faverol remarked that it lay like a white, still flood from which stood out trees—indistinct islets of mystery. Beyond, a solitary light marking Janesford Hall seemed to intensify the all-pervading loneliness and quiet. With a shrug of his shoulders Faverol continued his walk. His spirits habitually were of the high order, and just now he was especially buoyant; so he whistled gaily little tunes of his own invention, set to rhymes of his nursery days. As his nursery had been the gutter, Faverol had quite a pretty talent for whistling. His rhymes, it may be, were questionable.

Doubtless, his present happy humour would have been considerably brightened had he known that, awaiting the Hon. Trevor Wyer in the room whence shone the solitary light, was a letter in which George Heron requested permission to put in an appearance at Janesford in two days' time.

CHAPTER X

FAVEROL HAS AN INSPIRATION

THE preliminaries of his "private case" gave Faverol but little difficulty. Whatever his personal foibles might be (and, it must be confessed, he "posed" somewhat, even to himself), in his profession the little police agent was very far from being a fool.

It was, indeed, no small compliment to him that he had been selected for special service on a matter which (though Faverol himself pooh-poohed it) had long been a source of secret and genuine worry to the heads of police throughout Europe.

To trace Sebastien Gautil, or, rather, his family to Seckley Cottage had been mere novice work, and Faverol had made short account of it, though the closed-up house in Brantworth Square had checked him for a few hours.

Having got thus far, unlike Mrs. Aubertin, Faverol did not attempt to find lodgings in Seckley village. A stranger in so small a place, he

would have attracted undue attention. Instead, he fell back upon the town of Beaudelay; and, in a very short while, it got about that the "genial old bloke staying at Widow Mentor's cottage" was a "Mr. Faver," a retired linendraper (in a small way), now enjoying an indefinite and somewhat vagrant holiday.

Rumour had it that he was Scotch, which was accounted for, perhaps, by Mr. Faver's unfamiliar accent, and by the fact that his command of the English language was far more correct than that of nine out of ten of the people with whom he came in contact. Mr. Faver was at pains not to repudiate his new nationality; he found it most convenient.

It was on the morning following his eventful fishing excursion to the island that Faverol, while dressing, first put his "case" before himself with any definiteness. He drew up, as it were, a kind of mental schedule.

"1. The man, Gautil"—he began—"exists in fact.

"2. A lady, a Frenchwoman (who, I am positive, is the Vicomtesse X.), has recently put in an appearance in the neighbourhood. She has already achieved a friendship with this Gautil's wife and daughter. Therefore:

"Granted—because obvious: That sly old fox,

Louis, in a measure spoke the truth. In Room 20 of the Bêche Noire a mysterious individual did keep an assignation with a woman whom he told to come to England and make the acquaintance of some people called Gautil.

"Deduction: At the time of the assignation this myst. indiv. either knew the Gautils previously, or knew of them.

"Question: Is there any one now in this neighbourhood likely to be that myst. indiv.?

"Answer (by elimination) No. (1) But a stranger called. Heron some weeks ago paid a visit to Janesford Hall—and he is coming again. (2) Sebastien Gautil himself may be the myst. indiv., in which case the whole affair will probably prove to be merely a vulgar and astonishingly barefaced intrigue of a married man. (Note.—This Gautil is frequently absent from home.) . . . But on consideration this (2) may be deleted, because Louis stated that the myst. indiv. wore a beard and moustache (his own), whereas this Gautil is reputed to be clean-shaven.

"Again, Louis spoke of two other men.

"Argument: Either Louis, drawing upon his memory of the 'Invisibles,' put these two men in to give colour to an otherwise very commonplace narrative, or——

"He spoke truth in this also.

"If Louis lied, I, Faverol, am on a wild-goose chase.

"If he spoke truth, then, perhaps, the myst. indiv. was (is) André Gaspard.

"Let us grant this. The equation, then, is formed.

"Myst. indiv. = André Gaspard.

"Myst. indiv. = Heron (?).

"Therefore, Heron = André Gaspard!

"But supposing André Gaspard to have escaped from New Caledonia and returned to Europe? And supposing him to be this Heron? What is he intending *chez* Gautil?

"They say hereabouts that this Gautil has a 'collection' of sorts. Then, the obvious answer to my question is, Robbery; which—equally obviously—has yet to take place."

(Wherein, of course, M. Faverol was quite inaccurate.)

"The Vicomtesse X.?"—he went on—"What part is she playing here? Accomplice? H'm. No! more likely". . . (M. Faverol was a man of the world; he shrugged his shoulders and dismissed that line of thought. But he was glad there was a woman in the case. It was sure to make matters easier for him in the end.)

"Finally"—the police agent concluded, as he brushed his hair in front of an ancient mirror, which certainly ought to have been sued forthwith for libel—"finally, there is the little—shall we say?—poacher, of whom my landlady spoke—who was seen twice near Seckley Cottage upon the same night. He is a stranger in this locality. H'm. Jean, 'the Rat,' one of that Gaspard's confederates, was ridiculously small.". . . Unconsciously Faverol expanded his chest, and made the most of his five feet five inches.

In the act of drawing in a deep breath Faverol also inhaled the very material odour of bacon sizzling in the pan, and his train of thought was forthwith switched off upon the track of breakfast. "Mr. Faver" made haste to descend the rickety stairs to the parlour, whistling like the proverbial lark.

Later in the day he was to be seen upon the river bank, angling sedulously, never very far away from the big gates at the bottom of the Janesford avenue. Occasionally he munched a crust of bread and chocolate, between whiles he smoked a perfect "chain" of cigarettes.

The first day his catch of fish worked out at four small gudgeon. Nevertheless, noon of the next day found him again in the same spot. Had

it been necessary he would have returned thither every day for a month.

His illimitable stock of patience, however, was scarcely sampled, even.

About four o'clock in the afternoon the Hon. Trevor Wyer swung out of the avenue in his dog-cart, and set off at a rattling pace towards Beaudelay.

"Mr. Faver" immediately reverted to Faverol—and became professionally hopeful. It occurred to him that the "London train" reached Beaudelay Station at 4.25 P.M., and that the young milord's son was driving to meet it. Evidently Wyer himself was returning, for there was no groom. Possibly, then, he would bring back a passenger.

Faverol's conjecture proved correct. Just as the autumn daylight was beginning to fade and thin wisps of mist to rise from the river, he perceived in the distance the dog-cart with two men seated in it coming round the big bend in the road. At once he gathered together his fishing-tackle and sauntered along the footpath.

As the dog-cart approached, Faverol called out a cheery "Good-night!" in true country style; and Wyer, recognising in him the somnolent angler of the island, grinned pleasantly, and raised his whip by way of acknowledgment.

Wyer's companion, an upright, grey-bearded,

almost naval-looking man, who appeared to be upon the best of terms with all the world, barely accorded Faverol a glance, and went on with the humorous anecdote which he was relating in jovial, care-free tones.

Somehow, Faverol experienced a "setback." "Phoo!" he muttered. "Phoo! That may be M. Heron. But André Gaspard!—that remarkably fine, happy-looking individual—a *forçat!* Twenty years of New Caledonia, and he returns like that! Incredible!"

The "setback" was pronounced. Faverol became almost irritable. "Here am I," he said to himself, as he trudged along the lonely riverside road, "a man who should be surprised at nothing in this world, allowing myself to get a tic because of a fleeting impression—like a neurotic school-miss! Pah!"

Nevertheless, the impression clung to him. On arrival at his lodgings he climbed to his attic bedroom, lighted a candle, and took from a small, locked portfolio the old newspaper cutting which he had artlessly appropriated from Louis at their interview in Paris. Then he flung himself upon his bed and gave himself up to a minute scrutiny of the portraits of the "Invisibles." It availed him little enough.

At the expiration of half an hour his landlady called up the stairs, inquiring if "Mister Faver" knew that supper had been waiting on the table this, she didn't know, how long.

"Ah! if only Louis were here," he murmured with a sigh. Then, fervently, under his breath, he cursed Louis for his crass stupidity in allowing himself to be burnt to death in the conflagration of the Bêche Noire. Thus, for a second time, and in a second issue connected with his "case," Faverol unwittingly was remarkably inaccurate.

After supper he went out for a stroll; but instead of paying his customary call at that most useful fount of gossip, the "Live and Let Live Inn," he again took the road to Janesford.

In the circumstances, Janesford Hall had an irresistible attraction for him, and, though the police agent had formed no definite plan, the dense mist seemed opportune: it gave him ideas and suggested enterprise.

By the time he reached the big gates, Faverol's ideas to some extent had materialised. The avenue was broad, and he made his way up it as boldly as the mist would allow; but on nearing the courtyard two dogs began barking, and he slipped like a shadow into a path through the shrubbery.

Presently, he found himself facing the side door,

now promoted to the dignity of main entrance. An old-fashioned lantern suspended under the porch cast a dim light upon the short flight of steps, while at the same time, curiously enough, bringing into prominence the black iron nail-heads with which the ancient door was studded. Otherwise, on this side, the mansion was in complete darkness, and seemed to loom up unnaturally big and sombre through the mist.

The continual barking of the dogs disturbed Faverol not one whit. He felt assured that they were on the chain; else, he surmised, they would not now be barking. The police agent also guessed quite correctly the breed of the two dogs, an Airedale and a fox-terrier: a precision which may serve to show Faverol in his true professional light.

After a few moments' hesitation Faverol turned away from the door, and deserting the path, brushed cautiously through the bushes, until, striking a new path, he came to an arched opening in a high, thick yew hedge.

Passing through this, he emerged upon a broad terrace stretching along the front of the Hall. The long tier of ground-floor windows had an elevation of six feet or more above the terrace; only one of them, at the extreme right of the build-

ing and quite close to the yew hedge, was illuminated.

Faverol noticed that the lighted window was latticed and slightly open. A stone flower urn seemed to offer support for the right foot; the left, with a slight stretch, could easily be planted firmly upon a buttress.

Faverol crossed the terrace on tiptoe; and in a few instants had gained a position from which, by bending sideways, he could rest his forearms upon the deep, projecting window-sill. Although the curtains were drawn, he could hear clearly enough two men, whom he judged to be the Hon. Trevor and his guest, conversing within the room.

Probably, dinner over, they were now comfortably settled in chairs before the fire. With envy, Faverol's keen nostrils distinguished both pipe and cigar smoke creeping out and mingling with the earthy smell of the night mist.

For a long time nothing of any interest whatever reached the listener's ears. As a matter of fact, since all Faverol hoped to learn was the identity of Wyer's guest, he might reasonably have curbed his impatience until breakfast next morning, when his landlady undoubtedly would have supplied the information.

Gossip flies fast in Beaudelay. But Faverol had experience of "cases" in which the slighest delay in gaining information had marred, if not entirely frustrated, success; and, in business, the police agent suffered no squeamishness concerning his method of gaining that information. The safety of the public, he would observe, with an intense seriousness, "ranks higher than the privacy of the individual; but I, Henri Faverol, remember, am a gentleman, always. Phoo!"

At last, a casual remark uttered within the room removed all doubts—hopes, even—that the stranger was other than M. Heron; and Faverol was on the point of vacating his position, when he overheard something further, which made him prick up his ears and completely forget the crampedness of his limbs.

"By the way," he heard Heron inquire, "has Gautil père put in an appearance yet?"

"Yes," Wyer replied, "but only on a flying visit. I didn't see him. But, I say, that reminds me; I've rather a rum yarn for you."

Wyer then proceeded to give a slangy, but very thorough, account of his extraordinary experience on the night on which he had returned from London.

The narrative concluded with Hatt's delivery

of Gautil's letter; then Faverol heard a chair pushed back, some one move across the room, and a drawer pulled open vigorously, followed by a rustle of papers.

"That's the letter," Wyer said. "It's hardly cricket, I suppose, to show it to you; but—tell the truth—I've been a goodish bit bothered over the whole affair, and at sixes and sevens what to do. . . . What do you make of it?" after a pause.

"A trifle over-humble," said Heron. "But it seems plain enough. How does Hatt explain his mistake?"

"He doesn't try to," said Wyer. "Dumb as a fish. Had his orders—and he's going to stick to them, I take it. A capital servant."

"H'm. For the 'stupidity of an over-zealous servant,' as Mr. Gautil puts it in his letter, I should put 'an excess of beer.'"

"I'd agree," Wyer said dubiously, "if I could forget those three empty picture frames."

"Why bother?" his guest said, in a slightly bored tone. "If a man likes to lose his belongings without making an effort to recover them, let him —say I. Besides, it's just possible that Gautil is pulling all sorts of invisible strings, and any publicity would ruin his plans."

"Possible, I suppose," Wyer grumbled. "Any-

way, it strikes me I'd have done better if I'd given the police first innings. I'll tell you what it is," he jerked out, after a short silence, "it's a rotten thing to say, but if Gautil wasn't—er—who he is, I should feel inclined to think there was something fishy in the affair."

"Eh? Fishy?"

"Yes. Pitch-watered-overnight kind of job—"

"What! You mean Gautil——"

"Well, this hushing up—hanged if it doesn't look as if he didn't want any one to know he had the beastly things in the first instance."

"Perhaps he doesn't. These collectors are touchy fellows. Every-day morality doesn't always apply to them"—a careless laugh; then: "But, my dear chap, as I said before, why bother? Personally, I don't believe there was any burglary at all."

"I don't know so much. Lately, the more I think of it, the less I doubt it. But, I say, don't run away with the idea that I'm hinting Gautil stole pictures or anything else." Wyer put in hastily. "Oh! hang it! I've been bothered lately by the confounded business. You see, it happens to be rather a personal matter with me. Er—it's like this. I shouldn't like to think Miss Gautil's father was—er—well, 'not quite'—er—"

Faverol heard but a very little more. Whether from the fact that he was, as he frequently stated, a gentleman always, or from a cynical reasoning which told him that the topic introduced by Wyer was both inexhaustible and immaterial, or, merely, because his limbs had become unendurably cramped: whatever the reason, Faverol cautiously descended to the ground.

Having obliterated as far as he was able all traces of his presence, he made a bee-line down the park land sloping away from the terrace in front of the mansion, and joined the avenue close by the big gates. He had no "nerves"; and the eerie stillness which a heavy mist seems to compel upon a rural night only served to help him to concentrate his thoughts. And he had cause to think.

A robbery might, or might not, have taken place at Seckley Cottage. Faverol would settle that question later. It might have been the work of André Gaspard and his gang; or it might be merely a coincidence. Heron might be André Gaspard, or—" ("Curse Louis!")

Here Faverol's thoughts stumbled, but instantly revived, for he had other, more insistent matters to think about.

While listening at the window, one of those flashes of inspiration—guesswork, if you like, but

they mark genius—which not seldom bring fame to men of his profession and experience in pouncing upon apparently trivial details: one of those flashes had caused Faverol almost to dismiss André Gaspard from his mind. Indeed, it seemed as if in his quest of what might prove to be a shadow, Faverol had stumbled upon a reality.

Granted (thus he argued with himself as he plodded homewards through the mist)—granted that a robbery had taken place at Seckley Cottage.

Suppose three pictures—if nothing else—had been stolen.

Very well. And this Gautil denied it. Why?

The pictures were of no value. Pooh!

Then they were valuable. Three valuable pictures. Three! Two, fairly large; one, smaller. Three!

"Name of a pig! Why do I keep on thinking of those three pictures stolen from the Louvre?" Faverol muttered, coming suddenly to a halt upon the crown of Beaudelay Bridge. "Oh! decidedly I must make the acquaintance of this Gautil."

At that moment he was recalled to his surroundings by the misty approach of a burly be-caped figure, who seemed desirous of exercising his right to be inquisitive. "Mr. Faver" granted the constable every facility, offered him a cigarette,

sympathised with him over the hardships of his lot, and, having uttered a pious expression of thankfulness that he himself was not in the "for-r-ce," continued on his way bedwards, whistling merry little trills.

At Janesford Hall several hours later another man's thoughts centred on Sebastien Gautil. It was interesting, of course—because quite unexpected—that his young host's reserve concerning the charming daughter had broken down; but it was as nothing compared with the father's unaccountable desire to keep his loss secret.

Striding with noiseless footfalls up and down his long bedchamber, Heron pondered over his first meeting with Celeste Gautil, when he had been startled into a display of bad manners by a certain resemblance he had seen for an instant in her face. Yes; and on the night he had dined at Seckley Cottage he had again, once or twice, caught that resemblance to one whose features were constantly in his mind. It accounted for his return to Janesford, and his determination at all risks to see this Gautil—to follow up what he believed to be his luck. Luck had revealed to him that resemblance: luck—Heron's providence—which stood to him for religion—his everything.

All at once Heron stood stock still; a gleam of sardonic amusement came into his eyes, and relieved momentarily the grim set of his brows.

"By ——!" he muttered. (How strange it is that those who believe least in the Deity should call upon His Name most often!) "By ——! whoever he is, I suspect this Gautil is a 'crook.' He is of the fraternity."

Suddenly, flinging up an arm with an extraordinarily dramatic gesture, Heron apostrophised the dark oaken ceiling: "Ah, Luck! Luck! Luck! Is it my luck?"

He might have been a pagan priest invoking the special fetish of his tribe. A Highlander would have said that the man was "fey."

CHAPTER XI

MARKING TIME—AND ONE WINDPIPE

NOW that, owing to his sudden inspiration, M. Faverol's attention had been drawn more closely to the absentee tenant of Seckley Cottage, the police agent perceived that what he had already learned with regard to Mr. Gautil took on a very different, and significant aspect.

Examined in the light of suspicion, it was, indeed, extraordinary how impenetrable a barrier of secrecy Gautil had contrived around himself and his household. Everything seemed to point to a desire to have as few clacking tongues about him as possible. Take the evident forethought with which the servants at the old dower house had been chosen.

The cook, the 'tween-maid, the parlour-maid, and the lady's maid, all elderly, unprepossessing to a degree, and "imported," "kept themselves to themselves," said the local gossips, often adding that they hoped the furriners would continue to do

so: for their faces were enough to turn all the cream in the neighbourhood sour.

The two gardeners, who lived in cottages at Seckley village, knew nothing concerning the interior arrangements of their employer's house, and they seemed to care less. Report had it that their wages were unusually high.

Then there was Hatt—"close as a fish." Nothing to be got from him. Locally the ex-soldier was no favourite, and he had been left severely alone since the occasion when the "fancy man" of the gossips, having failed to draw his reserve, had stated that a savage Indian had cut out the blooming lobster's tongue and strung it round his neck for a keepsake. Hearing which, and objecting to being miscalled, Hatt had replied that at all events his fists had been spared to him; and he had proceeded to give a practical and very effective demonstration of the fact.

Again, Faverol pondered, how curious it was that so obviously wealthy and far from parsimonious an individual as Gautil should leave the lodge at the top of the Seckley drive untenanted and out of repair! Coupled with the other peculiarities, the omission was striking!

With regard to Gautil's "collection," Faverol could find out nothing definite. Apparently Mrs.

Gautil and her daughter took so little interest that they never mentioned it; though, of course, they might only be carrying out Gautil's expressed wishes in the matter. The servants of those few people who paid calls at Seckley Cottage affirmed that their masters and mistresses had never been permitted to view the "collection."

Of tittle-tattle, of course, there was plenty. For example, the bricklayers, who had assisted at the building-in of Hatt's cubicle, hinted that Gautil's was not an inanimate collection, but . . . well, in the game of inventing skeletons for other folks' cupboards the countryside can give points, and a beating, to the towns.

Faverol was forced to admit that he was in a cul-de-sac. He would have given almost all he possessed for a description, however meagre, of the three paintings which now he was stubbornly convinced were not only "missing" from Gautil's "collection," but were the three famous invaluable masterpieces stolen by "English Harry" from the Louvre in Paris.

And, oddly enough, the more Faverol allowed his mind to dwell upon the possibility of Gautil being a rogue, the more sceptical he became that George Heron was André Gaspard. In fact, to his chagrin, he began seriously to suspect that old

Louis had indeed sent him off on a wild-goose chase.

As to the burglary at Seckley Cottage, the account of which he had overheard while listening at the window at Janesford Hall (an experiment which, by the way, he deemed it unnecessary to repeat), the police agent had a new theory. Why should it not be the work of Gautil himself, who had conceived that method of spiriting away the paintings in order to effect a secret disposal of them?

A rogue's cleverness, Faverol knew, is often too clever, and ends in outwitting the warped genius himself.

However, nothing could be done until Gautil put in an appearance; and even then extreme caution would be necessary in dealing with him. Faverol admitted frankly that he had no idea how he would proceed; and that being so, he did the next best thing possible: he settled down philosophically to "sit tight."

Meanwhile, in spite of his doubts, he would keep a watchful eye on George Heron and Mrs. Aubertin, trusting in luck that they would not leave the neighbourhood prematurely, and thus place him, Faverol, in the dilemma of not knowing whether to follow them or to stay behind.

If that happened, the police agent acknowledged

ruefully that he would have to consider the advisability of sharing his secret with one of his professional brethren, English or French; and that he particularly hoped to avoid, until he had gathered proof positive.

George Heron certainly seemed in no hurry to cut short his visit to Janesford Hall. Of that individual it was quite easy to obtain plenty of information.

The Hon. Trevor's guest and his doings were in everybody's mouth, for Heron showed himself freely and was open-handed and genial, almost "hail-fellow-well-met" with all and sundry. He shot and fished with Wyer, or rambled about the country by himself what time the host was occupied with his duties on the estate.

None of the surrounding gentry called upon him, for it was understood that Heron had expressed a desire for quiet, his exceptions socially consisting of afternoon teas and dinner at Seckley Cottage in company with Wyer. On these occasions Heron met Mrs. Aubertin. Apparently the two were strangers.

Of course, said the gossips, Heron knew of the Hon. Trevor's attraction for the pretty lady at the cottage, and, like a decent chap, obligingly took on the job of "playing gooseberry."

Here it may be said that the self-constituted matchmakers were not over and above satisfied with the way things were going with regard to the young couple; but, though, by some mysterious instinct of their kind, they had realised that the course of love was not running altogether smoothly, they took comfort in these visits of the two men to Seckley Cottage, and hopefully went on wagging their heads and tongues, for "a maid in love was allus queer and contrary," said the wiseacres.

The weather still kept extraordinarily fine and warm; and one afternoon Faverol, happening to be near the Seckley boathouse, espied Heron set off down-stream alone in a boat with Mrs. Aubertin.

Faverol followed leisurely along the river bank. He half hoped he might get an opportunity of overhearing a tête-à-tête, perhaps, upon the island. But in this the police agent was disappointed. Heron was merely escorting the lady back to her lodgings; for, after disembarking under the big oak at Folley Point, he was out of Faverol's sight just long enough to make a quick return journey through the belt of wood to Penny Farm.

When he reappeared, he at once entered the boat and pulled up-stream again. It caused Faverol some amusement to note that in spite of his muscular arms Heron was compelled to

attack the long island ford twice before gaining the mastery. It has already been said that the little police agent habitually found humour in small things. Faverol's keen eyes also noted that the man in the boat was none too pleased at his preliminary failures.

Mrs. Aubertin spent a great deal of her time with Mrs. Gautil. The two ladies appeared to have formed a strong attachment; and it was said that Mrs. Gautil had unavailingly pressed her friend to transfer her abode to Seckley Cottage; for, Mrs. Pountney's motherly "coddling" notwithstanding, Mrs. Aubertin looked far more of an invalid than when she first arrived at Penny Farm. She wore an "unhappy" air, which was a source of sincere and unselfish worry to the Pountneys, who had become quite fond of their lodger.

She brooded when alone; and, on the night after she had been escorted back to the farm by Heron, Mrs. Pountney had been awakened by sounds of distress. On going into Mrs. Aubertin's room, she had discovered her kneeling at the low window-sill, clad only in her dainty white night attire just as she had sprung from her bed, and weeping with complete abandon.

The lattice window was wide open, the blind drawn up, and a cold, clear moon looked pitilessly

upon as pathetic a scene as it is possible to conceive. The kindly old woman's first instinct was to close the window and draw down the blind; then she set about the task of coaxing the poor distraught lady back to bed and soothing her to sleep.

It is not given to us to know what transpired in that midnight hour; perhaps Mrs. Pountney learned nothing; perhaps she learned all she wanted to know by instinct—whatever the case, gossip though she was by nature and by habit, Mrs. Pountney kept her knowledge rigidly to herself.

But on returning to her own connubial feather bed she disturbed her slumbering husband apparently, it seemed, for the mere purpose of informing him that all men were brutes. And it is to be suspected that, in accordance with the general cussedness of things, for the next few days the burly old farmer would have had a very bad time of it had he not, from a wisdom born of experience, made a point of finding work which would keep him continually out of doors, and especially out of his wife's kitchen.

The best of men have to share somehow or other the penalty of their less worthy brethren's shortcomings. The reason why is in a locked cupboard for them; and woman withholds the key.

With one exception, recorded later, life at Janesford Hall progressed quietly and without a note of discordance. Heron proved himself an ideal guest, and suited himself to a household (or, rather, a moiety of one) which was certainly peculiar.

He found himself in a quaint atmosphere of splendour and poverty, of formality and extreme "easiness," of subtle pride, and yet engaging humility.

The charm of it all—and especially of his young host, who, despite his facility for "slang," personified his surroundings—grew upon Heron, and, though he gibed at himself, he realised that in some mysterious way he was changed.

Once or twice he caught himself "play-acting" no longer, but gazing with a real regard, if not affection, at the clean, frank, "boyish" man who reposed such absolute trust in him; who, without putting it into words, let him understand that he accepted his guest as a "gentleman"—in its best sense—and, therefore, out of reach of the faintest curiosity or suspicion.

Of this there was a striking example, which, by the way, would have interested M. Faverol exceedingly. It was an example also of Heron's remarkable change of mental attitude.

It happened (to be precise, on the same night

that Mrs. Pountney afforded comfort to her lodger) that, as he kept his customary vigil in his sombre bed-chamber, Heron's thoughts were centred upon the portrait of a lady in Court dress which hung in the long gallery on the floor beneath him. Heron had spoken of the painting to his host.

"I take it, it is a 'Romney,'" Heron had remarked.

"I believe so," Wyer had replied carelessly, adding more seriously, but without affectation, "but it isn't that which makes it valuable, so far as I am concerned. Fact is, it was a great favourite of my Mater's, though my guv'nor swore he could see nothing in the bally thing."

"Aren't you afraid of it being stolen?" Heron had suggested. "If it were mine, I should keep it in a safer place, I think. Indeed," he went on curtly, "I strongly advise you to have it removed."

Heron's advice had been inexplicable to himself, and he had been astonished at the sudden inner promptings which compelled him to offer it. But Wyer had brushed aside the matter with a laugh.

"No," he had said, "somehow that would be like luck going out of the house. No. Where it hangs it stays. Besides, I doubt there's half a dozen chaps in the world who know of its existence, and

Janesford's too blessed well-known as Poverty Hall to attract burglars, except, p'raps, the road-padding sort who, poor devils, would probably only want to find their way to the larder."

Now, in the privacy of his chamber, Heron's professional instinct warred with that unaccountable flicker of a better instinct which he had thought completely dead within him. The portrait was valuable—£500 could be squeezed out of the "little Dutchman" for it. But could he, who, whatever else he had done in his professional career, had never betrayed hospitality, could he? . . . And, yes, Wyer was evidently very fond of the portrait. . . . It had been a favourite of his mother.

"Curse it!" muttered Heron, with his mouth awry. "I am becoming soft. Jean would want to harden me with an inch or two of a knife blade."

Shortly afterwards, to his own cynical amusement, he left his room and made his way silently down the wide staircase to the long gallery.

Outside, the moon was almost at the full, and, slanting obliquely through the row of tall windows facing the family portraits, it cast upon the polished floor a strongly contrasted succession of bars of light and darkness.

Between two windows, where it was pitch black,

and opposite the "Romney," there was an old oak settle. Heron seated himself and stared thoughtfully at the painting, of which he could barely discern the main outlines. For half an hour he sat there motionless. Wyer's mother, probably, had occupied the same position many times. . . . What was it his young host had said about luck? . . . No! the "Romney" should remain unmolested. . . Curse it! He was a fool.

Heron's decision wavered; his thoughts refused to concentrate themselves; he experienced a unique feeling of mental uneasiness and moved restlessly in his seat. Then, suddenly, he became alert and rigid.

Noiselessly as a ghost, some one—a boy—no—a small man—had appeared at the far end of the gallery, and was gliding slowly along it, stopping every now and then in the shadows to peer up at the portraits.

For a few grim seconds Heron watched him in silence, then, as the intruder entered a bar of moonlight:

"Stand still, my friend!" Heron commanded, in a low, distinct voice.

The little man crouched down; his hand whipped behind his back and rose over his shoulder, and the moonlight flashed on bright steel. Thus he

remained for a few seconds, his chin peaked forward and swaying to and fro, as if he were a rat, cornered, yet bewildered, because he could perceive no one. Then he moved swiftly backwards, and became a darkened blot in a deep shadow.

"Jean!" Heron said, in clear tones, in French. "Come here, my friend! It is I, your leader, who commands you. You are never invisible to me." As he spoke, he rose from the settle and stood in front of a window, so that the moonlight fell upon his face.

A gasp of relief followed his action; then Jean came forward, haltingly, as if he were being dragged from his concealment against his will.

"You, guv'nor!" he jerked out in a whisper. "What a holy joke! *Sacré!* What luck!"—he broke off, and gave an uneasy snigger of laughter, which merged into a scream of terror as Heron leaped at him and caught him by the throat. He felt himself irresistibly pressed backwards to the floor, where he lay without power to move a limb under the weight of his assailant, whose eyes, not six inches away, glared down into his own with ruthless determination.

In the ensuing deathly silence Heron, with ears alert, caught the sound of soft footfalls. Some one was coming! In a flash he realised the folly of

being discovered with a dead man under him. The consequent publicity possibly would be fatal to him. He released the grip of his finger and thumb from Jean's windpipe and jerked the little man bodily to his feet.

"Run!" he whispered hurriedly. "Go to London—watch your newspaper for my orders—do you understand?—watch your newspaper!—go, you fool!"

He pushed Jean away; and he, himself, after quickly disarranging his dinner jacket and collar and tie, subsided to the floor and lay still. With his hands to his throat Jean gasped, hesitated, then, hearing an ejaculation of astonishment at the top of the gallery, and seeing a figure running towards him, he turned and fled whence he had first come.

The newcomer sprinted down the gallery in pursuit; but Heron, rising unsteadily to his feet, contrived to stumble against him, and before he could regain his balance he, too, was grappled and overborne to the floor.

For a few moments the two men struggled ineffectually. Suddenly Heron sprang away.

"Good heavens!" he cried, feigning absolute astonishment, "it's you!"

"What! That you, Heron?" Wyer gasped out

in very natural annoyance. "Hang it all!—yes, it's me. Who the deuce did you think I was?" rising to his feet and fumbling at the buttons of his pyjamas, which had been burst open.

"Hanged if I know. All I do know is that I've been trying to hold some one for the last five minutes, but he got me a jab in the wind and dazed me for a bit; then, I suppose, you bumped into me, and I went at it again."

"My golly! We are a pair of mugs. Well, come on! Let's after the beggar. I saw him. He can't have got far— Hullo! old man— Oh! I say! hang it! Hurt?"—for Heron was bending down with his hands compressing his middle as if in pain.

"No-o . . . I'm all right. A bit queer . . . . I can't run . . . . You go after the brute. I'll manage right enough."

"Not I. Let the beggar go. Here, old man," he inquired anxiously, "like me to fetch a spot of brandy?"

"Not a bad idea," murmured Heron. "But, confound it! I'm not an old woman. I'll get it myself. You go after that chap." Heron stood upright and made a poor show of walking by himself.

"Not I," reiterated Wyer with decision. He linked his arm with Heron's, and assisted him

slowly from the gallery and downstairs to Wyer's snuggery.

There, Wyer lighted a lamp, and soon, under the influence of a little brandy, Heron recovered.

"Well!" he ejaculated presently with disgust, "I'm not proud of myself."

"Oh! I don't see that," Wyer replied, picking up a striped sofa-rug and flinging it like a shawl around his shoulders. "A tap on the bellows will knock any man out."

"Yes; but that chap!—did you see him?"

"Just a glimpse. A little beggar, wasn't he?"

"It struck me he was tall and lathy. Whatever he was, he was odoriferous. Pah!"

"Well; it doesn't matter," Wyer remarked; "I suppose he's got away by now. He'd hardly stay inside if he could help it. Anyhow, I'm going to light a pipe and wander round the place. You slip off to bed, old man."

"No. I'll tackle a smoke, too; a cigarette, I think."

"Wonder where he got in?"

"Same way he's gone out," Heron replied. He crossed the room and pulled aside the window curtains. "Ah! I thought so," he remarked. "Window's open. He got in here, right enough. You see, I was smoking a cigar at my bedroom win-

dow—I'm a rotten bad hand at turning in—and I thought I saw someone come through the yew hedge and slip across the terrace just underneath here. I wasn't quite sure; it was a queer mixture of light and shade outside. Anyhow, your dogs were barking rather excessively, so I thought I'd see if anything were wrong."

"Why the deuce didn't you give me a shake up?" Wyer interrupted.

"Oh! it was possible my eyesight had tricked me. Besides," Heron added, "I've been used to tackle jobs of this kind on my own hook all my life. And that's why I said I wasn't proud of myself just now. Well," he went on, "when I got outside this door I heard some one moving about behind me; and, evidently, he heard me; and, as I had cut off his retreat, he bolted upstairs. We played cat and mouse for a little time; then he made a bad move and got into the gallery. I chased him halfway down it, but the wily brute dropped in front of me, and I went sprawling over him. I think I trod on his hand—anyway he yelled——"

"Yes," Wyer broke in. "I heard that. The dogs woke me first. They're still at it in spasms."

"But I got him," Heron continued. "Or, rather, I didn't get him. He was a wiry customer."

Heron laughed a little ruefully; then he leaned out of the window. "I say," he called to his host presently. "Come here. Our man's gone."

Wyer joined him at the window, and together they looked out. In the bare soil of the flower border below, plainly visible in the brilliant moonlight, were two deep footmarks such as a man's heels would make had he leaped recklessly from the window.

"H'm," said Wyer. "He wouldn't be such a fool as to make that mess getting in. He's gone right enough. Gosh! he must be a cool hand to tackle a job in this moonlight. Well," he added, drawing within the room. "What's next?"

"Police, eh?" suggested Heron.

"I suppose so."

"Beastly nuisance this time of night. A lot of questions and a lot of measurements and notes in a constable's pocket-book, and all probably for the sake of a tramp, who equally probably got nothing but a bad fright. I was mauling his whiffy person long enough to be sure he'd got no boodle about him. Queer, this coming on the top of our talk about burglars, eh?"

"H'm, yes," Wyer admitted thoughtfully. "I say, though! I wonder if he was after the 'Rom-

ney.' That would be queerer still coming on the top of the Seckley Cottage burglary!"

"Coincidence," Heron replied. "Apart from the fact that I don't believe in that burglary, this chap wasn't after pictures. Judging by the smell of him, he was of the sort you mentioned—wanted the larder."

"Think so? I dare say you're right. And as a matter of fact, I doubt if a swell cracksman would have chosen a night like this. Anyway, I'm going to leave it till morning. Meanwhile, old man, you get to bed. I suppose you won't want a night-light, eh?" Heron joined in the laugh. "I'm going there myself as soon as I've had a look round. I'd better see if the Barnfields are all right, though I believe they'd sleep through the crack of doom."

"I'll come with you," Heron insisted. "Possibly there may be more than one in the job; and if one is still quartered temporarily on you, we may as well lay hold of him."

CHAPTER XII

GASPARD REGAINS WHAT HE IMAGINED HE HAD LOST

"RIGHT O!" Wyer agreed. "Come on, then."

The search party drew blank. Beyond what they already knew, they could discover no signs that an intruder had been within the mansion. And as Wyer had said, the Barnfields' repose had been undisturbed.

After breakfast, having been notified of the occurrence, a police sergeant arrived upon the scene; he did ask many questions, and he did take measurements of footmarks and other details; all of which he entered duly in the inevitable note-book. But there, so far as this story is concerned, the affair ended, in time becoming merely a matter of memory and entries in official archives.

This, perhaps, was a just retribution upon M. Faverol for his selfishness in not sharing his secrets with his professional brethren; for it is quite

possible that, had that astute individual had the little sum of "2 plus 2" put before him, he at any rate would not have made the answer come to "nothing"!

"Celeste, dear," remarked her mother, glancing at the ornate ormolu clock on the mantelpiece, "hadn't you better go and dress? They will be here in half an hour or so."

The girl made no reply. She was standing in the bow window, gazing with troubled eyes out into the dusk at the half-stripped branches of the copper beeches swaying in the wind.

It was rather a depressing outlook, for the long spell of fine weather had broken at last. Throughout the day the sky had been overcast and gloomy, and towards evening a chilly wind had swept up the valley, bearing in its embrace a fine, drizzling rain, and the first unmistakable harbinger of a dying year.

"Celeste, dear!" Mrs. Gautil repeated.

"Yes, Mother, I heard you," she sighed. "I do wish they were not coming."

The sigh and something in the girl's voice made the elder woman turn round in her chair. But she could not see her daughter's face. The quaint, old, walnut-panelled drawing-room was in half-

light which a cheerful fire in the wide, deeply recessed fire-place seemed to accentuate.

"Why, dear?" Mrs. Gautil asked gently. "Don't you feel well?"

"Oh! you know I'm never unwell," Celeste answered, a trifle fretfully. "What I meant was—don't you think we have seen a little too much of them lately?"

"But, dear, it is such a kindness to Mrs. Aubertin——"

"I wasn't referring to her," the girl interrupted. "I meant Mr. Wyer and his friend."

"But I thought you liked them!" her mother rejoined. "Besides, perhaps, it is a kindness to them, too. And I am sure they are both very nice—and such gentlemen. I think they like coming here."

"Oh! they know how to behave themselves—I know I'm horried, Mother dear," she burst out, "but I cannot get over my dislike of Mr. Heron. Yes, he's polite, and not effusive, and outwardly kind, and all that; but whenever he looks at me, whether he's smiling or grave, I get the impression there is another man beneath his smooth exterior which we haven't seen yet. . . . I can't help it."

"No, dear, I suppose not. But you must not let yourself be governed by what may be, and I

think is, only fancy. And, you know, I cannot ask Mr. Wyer without his guest. Besides, dear, the little reunions we have been having lately have been rather a pleasure to me."

"Yes, I know; I'm horrid," Celeste said again. "It is very nice here, and I've been very happy; but we are a little buried alive, I suppose. I don't mean to be selfish."

It was Mrs. Gautil's turn to sigh. "Yes," she admitted; "but we have every cause to be thankful. We have no worries; everything is provided for us; we are only women—and your father wishes it," she added, voicing an old-fashioned creed which had been that gentle lady's stand-by, and, perhaps, the cause of unruffled, if somewhat passive, happiness throughout her married life.

Celeste left the window, and kneeling upon the thick bearskin hearth-rug stretched out her hands to the blaze.

"What is Father?" she asked abruptly.

"What a funny question!"

"Is it? Oh, I don't know! Lately, I've rather wondered."

"Well, dear, I don't know any more than yourself. He is what is called a 'financier'; but what that is I really cannot say. I have never worried him with questions, and I think he appreci-

ates it. But he has hinted to me that he intends to retire soon; and from what he said to me recently, I rather imagine he has ideas of leaving this place, and is glad Lord Janesford would not sell it to him."

The girl looked up, dismay in her eyes. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Oh! I—" Then she broke off, and turned her head away.

Mrs. Gautil smiled with tender understanding, and wisely forebore to make further remark.

"When do you expect Father again?" Celeste inquired presently.

"I don't know, dear," her mother replied patiently. "He said he should not be away long this time, and he may return any moment. It will be nice when he gives up business, won't it, dear? Now," she added, brightly, rising, and for an instant lightly caressing her daughter's hair, "we really must go and dress, or we shall be late; and that would be very impolite. Ring for the lights before you come, dear."

Leaving Celeste staring moodily into the fire, Mrs. Gautil went slowly up to her room to dress for dinner. She was happy, yet troubled; happy because, though she had noticed in Celeste recently an unusual "unrest" and (especially in Wyer's company) a marked aloofness and constraint, she

felt convinced that her daughter's manner was but the outcome of a very natural maidenly defence against capitulation, and that matters would, in course of time, come to a satisfactory conclusion. Mrs. Gautil was troubled, because she was a good mother; for what good mother can bear without a pang the thought of her daughter being taken from her, even though she herself has every confidence in the captor-to-be?

A few minutes before half-past seven Mrs. Aubertin arrived. Hatt had been sent with the brougham to fetch her from Penny Farm. She looked very pale as she went slowly up the stairs to take off her wraps; and the maid who attended her thought she seemed a little excited and tremulous, and commented on the fact later to her fellow-servants.

But noticing the maid's covert interest, Mrs. Aubertin pulled herself together before descending the stairs to the drawing-room, and, on finding Wyer and Heron there chatting with Mrs. Gautil, some colour came into her cheeks, and she greeted them with charming vivacity, in strong contrast to the almost gauche demeanour of Celeste, who (it is to be feared, wilfully "late") entered just as the Chinese gong in the hall announced that dinner was ready.

The meal was not a success. Celeste was *distraite;* she spoke seldom, and only replied to the conversational efforts of others in monosyllables.

The harmony of the party lacked a note; but that note formed, as it were, the foundation of the chord, and its absence was acutely noticeable, though every one except the girl did their utmost to impart a lightness and gaiety to the occasion. Nor were matters improved by an interruption which occurred just as the "sweets" had succeeded the "game."

Hearing men's voices in the hall, Mrs. Gautil signalled by a little nod to the maid who was waiting at table. In response the maid went to the door, and, coming back, murmured something into her mistress's ear.

Mrs. Gautil rose at once, saying in apologetic, yet obviously pleased tones that Mr. Gautil had returned home unexpectedly, and asking her guests to excuse her for a few moments.

Very shortly she returned and took her place at the table again, when she again apologised for the "commotion," remarking that her husband was somewhat travel-stained and tired, and would have his dinner alone, but would join them later.

But, as has been stated, the interruption did not tend to add smoothness to the party; and all were

relieved when Mrs. Gautil led the ladies into the drawing-room.

"Queer sort of position," Wyer observed, lighting a cigarette. "No! no wine for me, thanks."

"Why queer?" Heron asked carelessly, helping himself to port.

"Eating the dinner and drinking the wine of a man one hasn't met. Aren't we a bit in the way—in the circumstances?"

"I don't think so," Heron replied, holding his glass up to the light. "First-rate wine, this. It would hardly be tactful to go yet. Mrs. Gautil evidently wishes us to stay. Cheer up!" he added jokingly. "Perhaps Mr. Gautil won't prove so very much of an ogre, after all. Don't mind my nonsense, my boy. I understand."

"It's not the father who is worrying me," Wyer replied gloomily. "Hang it! I've a jolly good mind to chuck it all and clear out to the Colonies again."

He flung away his half-consumed cigarette, and his eyes wandered unconsciously towards the door. Noticing this, with fine consideration, Heron put away the cigar he was on the point of lighting, and drained his glass.

"Meanwhile," he suggested, rising from the table, "suppose we join the ladies. With this

excellent wine on my palate, I'm not over-keen for a cigar."

"Right. I say, though, we won't stay late."

"Just as you like," returned Heron. "Give me the nod when you're ready. But I think we must wait until our host appears; and then, I take it, if he shows signs of wanting our company, we owe it to him not to appear too eager to go. I expect he'll want a word—with you, especially."

"Why me?"—just a little sharply.

"Hatt's burglary," Heron replied succinctly, smiling to himself, for he perceived that his companion had for the moment completely forgotten that affair, and was immersed in, to him, far more important matters.

They entered the drawing-room in time to join the ladies at coffee, and when the maid had retired with the tray Heron settled himself near Mrs. Aubertin, and proceeded to make himself agreeable. The remaining group of three was not so happily constituted. Celeste had ensconced herself upon a high footstool in an ingle-nook under the shelter of her mother's chair; evidently she had not shaken off the moodiness, for she hardly contributed to the conversation on trivialities which Mrs. Gautil endeavoured to maintain. Wyer, too, was not himself, and his usually jolly countenance

wore an expression as near sulkiness as his innate courtesy would allow.

At last, whimsically despairing of the situation, Mrs. Gautil asked Heron to sing. He rose with alacrity, and went to the piano in an alcove at the far end of the room, where, after a slight pause, he broke into a gay little chansonette.

Heron possessed a voice of unusual quality: a high baritone, verging almost on a tenor, with a round richness delightful to the ear.

At times, as it did while Heron sang his first song, his voice could ring full of light-heartedness; at others it could vibrate with passion, with that peculiar haunting timbre which somehow seems to come from a heart overflowing with sympathy. In the possession of a young man it might have been a "dangerous" voice, for few women could hear it and remain unmoved.

It is astonishing, even in this enlightened age, how many women, young and old, mistake the attributes of the man for the man himself!

Without waiting for applause, at the conclusion of his first song, Heron drifted into another, equally light and gay. Then he would have stopped; but Mrs. Gautil begged him to go on.

"Oh, Mr. Heron," she said, "will you please sing us that charming little French song we liked

so much? I mean the one which you composed yourself; you call it '*Ecoute!*' I think. I do want Mrs. Aubertin to hear it. I meant to ask you the last time you were here, but something put it out of my mind."

In her corner Celeste moved uneasily, half opened her lips, but closed them and turned away. For a few moments Heron stared in silence at the keyboard; he glanced round at Mrs. Aubertin, a strange, dreamy expression in his eyes, but she kept her face averted.

Mrs. Gautil alone caught the look, and put her own construction on its meaning.

Then Heron turned slowly to the piano again, and pressed down a few soft, almost fragmentary chords. Smoothly the voice joined in on a low, sustained note—it might have been the sigh of a lover who, with bursting heart, was beginning to plead to his mistress.

There followed three verses: one of tenderness, one of hope, the last of unrestrainable passion; then a pause; and presently a single chord in a minor key seemed to float into the room—a chord ineffably sad—as if the singer's heart had drooped, all too conscious that his pleading was in vain; it had come "too late."

A brief silence fell upon the room. Even

Wyer, though he had not understood the words, on this occasion was affected; his own emotion surprised him. He could not speak, and, glancing instinctively at Celeste, something seemed to swell within his breast and almost stifle him.

Frank tears welled up in Mrs. Gautil's eyes; possibly because she was the one listener in the room who was happy, she could afford to disdain to suppress her feelings.

It was Mrs. Aubertin who broke the spell. She rose swiftly and stood facing the alcove, with one hand gripping the back of her chair.

"Oh," she cried, "you shouldn't—you shouldn't! It is not right to play upon our feelings." Then, as Heron swung round and fixed his dark eyes upon her, she checked herself, flushed red, then grew white, and went on in an odd voice: "Oh, but I could not help it! It carried me away. How foolish I am! I—" she broke off, looking towards the door. A tall, somewhat stout man in evening dress had entered quietly. Evidently he had been waiting for the music to cease before coming forward.

The newcomer was not altogether unprepossessing, but his face was rather dull, and the skin, even in the soft, advantageous light cast by the rose-coloured lamp-shades, appeared noticeably sallow.

One gained the impression that in his youth he had been quite good-looking; and somehow, at the first glance (though the impression faded later), one instinctively guessed that he was Celeste's father.

With a pleasant smile of welcome for her husband, Mrs. Gautil rose to effect the necessary introductions.

"Oh, that is right!" she said gaily. "Sebastien! Let me introduce you to Mrs. Aubertin——"

But Mrs. Aubertin had fainted.

Heron, who had noticed her swaying, ran forward quickly and caught her in his arms. He let her sink gently to the floor, and dropped on his knees beside her.

"Do not be alarmed," he said in quiet tones, which gave the others instant confidence in him. "Just an ordinary faint. But the fewer around her when she recovers the better. Mrs. Gautil, will you fetch a little brandy? The rest go, please. I am almost a doctor," Heron added, thus justifying his own intention to remain.

For a few short moments Heron was left alone with the unconscious woman. He gazed fixedly at the white face; his eyes dilated, as if he were suffering intense physical pain. He wavered—then suddenly he bent down and kissed her full upon the lips!

While Mrs. Aubertin was being attended to, Celeste had hastened upstairs to arrange her own room for the immediate use of the invalid. Without being told, the girl realised that her mother would not allow their guest to go back to the farm that night. Meanwhile Gautil took Wyer back to the dining-room, where he at once went into the subject of "Hatt's burglary." Hatt, he said conclusively, though usually a first-rate servant, was at times a fool and a trifle officious.

"Yes, Mr. Gautil," Wyer replied, somewhat bluntly, for he thought that he owed it to his host to speak out; "yes, but I did see three frames from which the canvases seemed to have been cut, so there was some excuse for your man. Besides, when you did not arrive—in view of the telegram, you know——"

"Well, yes," Gautil interrupted, "I was at fault in not wiring again to say I was detained. Yes—yes—Hatt was right to be a little suspicious at first. Perhaps I am wrong in putting all the blame on him. But he need not have made such a fool of himself afterwards.

"As for the paintings," he went on, with a laugh, "I had taken them away with me. I was trying to dispose of them privately. They were 'copies'—and not very good ones—of some

rather famous pictures. The edges of canvas you noticed were the remains of former daubs cut out to make temporary homes for the copies.

"The whole affair is very simply explained; but when you realise what a fuss might have been made, you will appreciate the hope expressed in my letter that you would not discuss it."

"Yes, of course," Wyer agreed; though in his heart of hearts he was not quite satisfied even now, for Hatt had declared other articles to be missing. "But," he added, "I think it is only right to confess that I asked Mr. Heron's advice in the matter. Even in the face of your letter, I was a bit puzzled what was my duty."

"Mr. Heron!" Gautil replied, frowning slightly. "And what did he advise?"

"Oh," Wyer answered, "he took your view—I mean, he advised me to keep my mouth shut. At any rate, no harm has been done. He's not a man to gossip."

Wyer's host somewhat pointedly changed the subject; and when Heron entered the room shortly afterwards with a report concerning the invalid, Gautil led his guests to the old-fashioned hall and politely insisted on their settling down upon the luxurious lounges grouped under the wide stair-

case and chatting with him over cigars and whiskies and sodas.

Gautil made himself very pleasant; clearly, he was a man of the world who knew what he was talking about. He inquired politely after Wyer's father, Lord Janesford, and spoke of the pleasure life at Seckley Cottage had given to Mrs. Gautil and Celeste. In Heron, at first, he evinced just the right amount of interest due to him as Wyer's friend; a man he might or might not meet again; but on learning how the two friends had become acquainted, Gautil appeared at odd moments to scrutinise his older guest a trifle more intently than was, perhaps, good breeding.

"You have travelled a good deal, then?" he inquired of Heron presently. "Are you Australian—a Colonial—may I ask?"

"Yes, and no," Heron replied, laughing lightly. "I'm a 'home bird,' and, unlike my friend here, I was uncommonly glad to return to my native land. As a matter of fact, when I met Wyer on board the *Orassa* I had just come from Noumea." He stopped, and sipped his whiskey. Somewhat abruptly Gautil also raised his glass, and Heron noticed that on the hand which clasped the glass a white weal stood out plainly on the apex knuckle of the little finger!

"Ah! Noumea!" Gautil said, putting down his glass and speaking in nonchalant tones. "Nothing much of interest there, I take it?"

"No. I was glad enough to get out of it," Heron replied. "I had business there with the Government—a mining matter, partly—nickel, you know. But the Government at the time had their hands full with the native insurrection, and had no time to attend to me; so in the end I left in disgust without completing my business."

"From what I learned while I was in the Colonies, and recently from you," Wyer put in, "there must be a good many others in New Caledonia who would be jolly glad to be able to follow your example—poor devils."

"The convicts?" Heron inquired. "No doubt you're right. But, luckily for the world, they cannot. Those I saw were—well—hardly human."

"Are there any known instances of escape?" Gautil asked carelessly.

Heron flicked the ash from his cigar. "I doubt if escape is practicable. Such a deuced lot of salt water between them and liberty," he added.

"Oh! I don't know," Wyer objected; "I'm open to bet it could be worked—given friends outside, money, and opportunity. The only difficulty I can see would be to find means of communi-

cation. I don't suppose the poor devils ever hear the postman's rat-tat while they're eating their breakfasts, eh?"

"Hardly," replied Heron amusedly; then, as an afterthought, "but, jokes apart, it is easy enough, apparently, to devise a means of communication. I heard of a case in point, where a well-known convict in New Caledonia got outside news through a priest."

"A priest!" Wyer cried.

Heron nodded. "It was rather extraordinary," he went on. "It appears that for many years some one in Paris was in the habit of sending anonymously to this priest, who, by the way, was a missionary of sorts, large consignments of religious books to be distributed among the convicts. To the convict I have in my mind, however, the books, when they chanced into his hands, were merely a code."

"A code!" Gautil broke in with polite, though careless, interest. "You mean a kind of newspaper?"

"More exciting than that. Plans for escape, I believe," Heron replied.

"Escape," Gautil rejoined, shrugging his shoulders. "Did the fellow escape? You said just now escape was impossible."

"Did I!" Heron observed. "Nothing is im-

possible. In the case I am speaking of, escape certainly was attempted. At all events, my convict did manage to elude the surveillance of the authorities, and now I come to think of it, at the same time two others were missing from other parts of the island. But what became of them all appears to be a mystery. Eaten by cannibals very likely. I shouldn't like to say that the three got right away from the island, you know."

"Two others!" Gautil exclaimed.

"Oh, a coincidence!" Heron replied lightly.

Outwardly losing all interest in the subject, Gautil leant back against the cushions and replaced his cigar between his teeth. The trifling action was none too adroitly performed, and a peculiarly sardonic smile crossed Heron's face.

"I wonder if it was coincidence," Wyer put in.

"I really couldn't say," Heron answered in offhand tones. Then his interest also seemed to flag.

But Wyer was still keen on the subject.

"By Gad!" he ejaculated, "the code dodge was cute. As for being eaten by cannibals—I don't see why. If the beggars could 'vamoose' into the bush and get to a spot arranged in the code message, it would be possible to get clear of the island. What price a vessel chartered for the purpose?

"There are plenty of South Sea schooner skippers who would tackle jolly harder jobs than that. I heard of one, though he's dead now (that reminds me; I'll tell you presently)—'Near-enough-Black,' they called him, an awful scamp, but dead straight in a deal; he would have done it, hands down."

"Black!" Heron exclaimed quickly. "That hoary old sinner dead! He's a well-known character out there. Black didn't peg out in his bunk, I'll wager."

"You're right there," Wyer went on. "But let me get it off my chest. Coming on the top of your yarn about escaped convicts, it strikes me as being rather rum. I got my information from a Sydney newspaper a pal out there sends me regularly," he prefaced.

"Well, according to the paper, one night last April, 'Near-enough-Black' brought his schooner, the *Coal Sack*, into Sydney harbour and anchored in Watson's Bay to wait till morning. Morning came, no schooner—she'd vanished; and deuce could any one say where! Well, not long ago—I can't give exact dates—another schooner came into Sydney.

"She had been dismasted somewhere in the South Seas, and had been overdue some months. The skipper of her reported that he had run across

the *Coal Sack*, damaged in the same storm and on the point of sinking. There was nobody on board her but one Kanaka, and he was badly hurt and a bit off his head.

"He died soon after being rescued, but before he pegged out he spun a rambling yarn about Black picking up three naked white men from some island or other and bringing them to Sydney. There, he said, Black had rowed the three men ashore, then come back to the schooner, and settled down to a big 'drunk.'

"Later in the night, the Kanaka and his mate—there were two aboard the *Coal Sack* then—had found Black lying on deck aft, with a knife in his throat. In a blue funk that they'd get hung for the job, the Kanakas had slipped anchor and got out to sea; and, until she was found, the *Coal Sack* had been wandering here, there, and everywhere about the blessed South Sea Ocean. What d'you say to that for a yarn, eh?" Wyer asked eagerly.

"Look here! if it's true, why shouldn't the three men Black picked up be the three convicts?" he stopped.

Gautil had risen abruptly, and turned away as if to greet his wife, who had come quietly downstairs into the hall.

"Mrs. Aubertin is better," she announced, "but

she is not quite herself yet. She does not wish us to send for a doctor. Celeste is with her, and asks me to offer her apologies for not coming down again. Sebastien, will you please send Hatt with a message explaining matters to the Pountneys?"

"Oh! don't bother to send Hatt," Wyer broke in. "I'll drive home round that way. I'm sure Heron won't mind, and it will do Primrose a lot of good."

After some slight reluctance Mrs. Gautil accepted the offer; and presently, perceiving that their hostess was somewhat constrained, Wyer and Heron took their departure.

"Sebastien, dear," said his wife anxiously, when she was alone with her husband, "you don't look at all well. Is anything the matter?"

"I've not been up to the mark lately," he replied testily. "I shall be glad when I've done with business."

"So shall I, dear. You deserve a rest from worry." She went up to him and kissed him.

He returned the kiss mechanically, yet not altogether without affection. "I shall be going away again soon for a few days," he said; "then I shall forfeit the lease of this place, and we will travel."

"Very well, dear," his wife replied patiently; then timidly, "But Celeste——"

"Celeste will come too," he interrupted, with decision.

"But, Sebastien!" she went on. "I thought you were content to allow things to—to go on. He is a very nice young man; and if he is poor, it surely doesn't matter."

"I have changed my mind," Gautil replied curtly, adding almost with a sneer, "and it probably is just as well, for I do not suppose Lord Janesford would ever give his consent."

Mrs. Gautil sighed, and went slowly upstairs to her bedroom. Lord Janesford and his possible objections were nothing to her; but the gentle lady hardly dare contemplate the thought even of resistance to her husband's wishes. For nearly twenty years she had acquiesced, without a murmur, in all his plans, and the habit seemed to have carried with it a certain amount of happiness. Would she be compelled to risk that happiness now? . . .

Next morning Heron announced regretfully, but firmly, that he must leave Janesford for London by an early train. The unexpected decision puzzled Wyer not a little; for, so far as he knew, Heron had received neither letter nor telegram which would have explained his reason for cutting short his visit so abruptly. But, as has been stated,

Wyer was not one to pry into other people's private reasons or affairs. He believed in the wisdom and courtesy of speeding the parting guest, and he made arrangements at once to drive Heron to Beaudelay station.

Perhaps, despite his characteristic good-nature, Wyer was just a little piqued that his guest had evaded giving a definite answer to repeated invitations to return to Janesford in the future.

But if, for a little while, such a petty resentment entered his mind, it was soon lost, overshadowed by Heron's last extraordinary remarks to him as he leaned out of the railway carriage window.

"My boy," Heron said, exhibiting unusual feeling, "it is hard to explain—but I am in your way here at Janesford. Go back. Seize your happiness with both hands. You know what I mean. And," he added, as the train began to move, "if you have any difficulty with the father, I pledge you my word I, myself, will remove it."

CHAPTER XIII

HONOUR (AMONG THIEVES)—AT A DISCOUNT

IT wanted five minutes of the midday hour—as some Americans insist upon putting it—when a tall, somewhat "distinguished" looking man, who had been engrossed all the morning in studying the ancient ceramics exhibited in the British Museum, glanced at his watch, and then sauntered down to the vast entrance hall.

Pushing open the swing-doors of the vestibule, he emerged on the terrace outside, and for a while stood at the top of the wide steps, watching, in a preoccupied sort of way, the pigeons strutting about in the courtyard and on the grass plots below. His was not an uncommon type: immaculately, though quietly dresssed, recently he had been a fairly frequent visitor to the Museum, and the attendants—no mean judges in such matters—had casually labelled him "army"; probably "retired," and, with equal probability, now engaged in collecting material for "writing a book."

However, major, colonel, general—or none of these—the man attracted little attention, for he bore himself with that peculiarly British, and especially military British air which seems to say: "I have absolutely no curiosity towards you and your affairs, and I shall be infinitely obliged if you will kindly stifle any such feeling you may possibly entertain towards myself."

After contemplating the pigeons for some time, the individual in question again consulted his watch. It was nearly five minutes past twelve, and he began to look about him more critically.

Quite a number of people passed the man, but he barely glanced at them, his attention having become occupied with his fellow-loiterers under the façade.

There happened to be but two of these; one, a youth leaning against a pillar and sharing a bun with a few venturesome sparrows; the other, an elderly gentleman, who, with his back turned, was examining the ancient, hollowed-out tree trunk which in former times served as a war canoe, or, perhaps, state barge—it matters not which—to some barbarian or other.

Presently the elderly gentleman turned round, smiled expectantly, and, with a gesture which was evidently a mannerism, raised his hand to his

beard. The stranger also raised his hand, almost as if he were saluting, and at the same moment took a pace forward.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "I thought I was not mistaken. So glad you managed to come."

The elderly gentleman laughed pleasantly. "But you weren't quite sure," he retorted gaily, shaking hands. "I fear I was very rude, turning my back on you, but I did not see you arrive. The fault lies with this curious example of the boat-builder's art, which took all my attention. One can hardly imagine heroes capable of propelling it from Putney to Mortlake, eh? By the way—where is John?"

"Unpunctual as ever, I suppose," returned the other.

"Well, to be candid, I am not entirely sorry," the elderly gentleman remarked. "I rather wanted a few minutes with you alone. But I should not like to miss him," he added. "He used to be a 'touchy' sort of fellow, eh?"

"Quite true. But it can easily be arranged. Come across to my chambers. They are just over the road; we can see these steps from the windows. I agree we must not miss him."

They strolled down the steps and out through the entrance gates into the street; and presently,

the taller of the two men turned in at a doorway and led the way up a flight of stairs to his chambers. The chambers proved to be a typical bachelor's suite, comfortable enough, without being luxurious; and a profusion of books and periodicals spoke of the studious, or, it may be, "dilettante" tendencies of the occupier. One thing was plain, however: the chambers were not the home, temporary or otherwise, of a poor man.

As soon as the door had been shut the elderly gentleman seemed to shed many of his years; and after a quick, comprehensive glance around the room, he nodded approvingly.

"Might do worse than this, eh?" he remarked.

"Somewhat," agreed his companion, who had taken up his station near the window, from which, as he had stated, a view of the steps of the British Museum was obtainable. "Make yourself at home," he added. "There are cigars and cigarettes on the mantelpiece."

"Thanks. Keep a man-servant?"

"No. I meal out. You can talk freely: there's no risk of being overheard."

The visitor pulled a comfortable wickerwork chair near to the window and sank into it with a sigh. "Thank goodness," he said. "I'm tired

of play-acting. And there's no need to keep up the 'heavy lead' with you—eh, Kit?"

"No," replied Polliter, seriously enough, "you can reserve that for Jean."

"Ah! Jean," reflectively, "we are going to have trouble with that parishioner."

"Will he turn up, do you think?"

Gaspard, or Heron (for the elderly gentleman was either of these personages when it suited his convenience), shrugged his shoulders. "It remains to be seen," he replied. "He and I have met since I shared out the 'little Dutchman's' cheque, and the interview may possibly have frightened him."

Polliter swung round from the window with a puzzled look on his face. "Met!" he exclaimed. "You and Jean met!—what the deuce has the fool being doing now?"

"Out on an affair of his own," Gaspard returned grimly. "Squandered all his share of the money, very likely, and after more. Unfortunately—for him—I happened to be a guest at the place he selected for his private attempt."

Gaspard then gave a brief account of his midnight encounter with Jean in the long gallery at Janesford Hall. "I believe I should have killed the dolt if I had not been interrupted," he concluded, in matter-of-fact tones; "but I am glad I

didn't. Might have made things extremely awkward for us."

"H'm," observed Polliter, moodily; "it would have been a good job if that club, or spear, or whatever it was, had done its work thoroughly. He's been nothing but a source of trouble to us. I think he's mad."

"So you remarked, I remember, while we were in the cave. A bit of a nightmare, the whole lot of it, eh? Well, it's past and done with. Luck has been with us so far." Gaspard broke off, frowning; then: "And we've another bone to pick with Jean. So serious that the sooner we split the better. The little brute knifed Captain Black!"

"What!"

Gaspard took a newspaper cutting from his pocket and handed it to Polliter. "Read that," he said, "and see what you make of it."

"Curse it!" muttered Polliter presently; "it's right enough. That's Jean's work."

"Of course it is. After we separated at Manly he purloined a boat and rowed out to the schooner. I suspected something like this from his manner at our meeting in Caveen Street. I had given my word to Black, too—swore on my luck—and I don't like it."

"Like it!" Polliter rapped out with fury. "I should think not! Why, hang him! if it hadn't been for this, not a soul would ever have suspected we had got clear of the island. They thought we'd been killed and eaten by the natives. And now some beast will put two and two together—and you know what that means. Half the detectives in the world will be on the lookout for us."

"Enough, at any rate, to scatter any sense of security we may have gained so far," Gaspard admitted.

"Does Jean know that you know?"

"I hardly think so. He wouldn't be likely to see the paper this was in." Gaspard rose, took the newspaper cutting from his companion, crumpled it, and flung it into the fire. Then he chose a fresh cigar in the place of his first, which had gone out, and resumed his comfortable attitude in the chair. There was a short silence.

"What are you going to do to him, if he turns up?" Polliter inquired, in a curious way, glaring out of the window.

"My dear Kit, we are not in the cave I mentioned just now. And, as I remarked in that cave, we are bound together by a vow."

"Vow or no vow, you meant to finish him at Janesford," Polliter retorted.

"I admit that would have been foolish," Gaspard replied, in silky tones. "We will not refer to that again, please."

"Sorry!" Polliter said, gruffly. "I take it back. Fact is, this foolery of Jean's has touched me on the raw. I thought we'd done with—with the past. Been too luxurious lately, I suppose"—bitterly. Then: "And I was afraid you meant to 'do him in,' now, or later. We'd get 'had' over that."

"I shall not touch him. Frankly, I need Jean's help."

"H'm! Looks as if you're not going to get it."

"If he doesn't come to-day, I'll put something in the paper that will soon fetch him"—significantly.

Polliter jerked round. "Ah! You've found Courtois!" It was more a statement than a question.

"I have."

"Well," Polliter growled, as if the words came with an effort, "I said I'd stand by you—and I will."

"Now it comes to the pinch, you funk it, eh, Kit?"

"So do you, Andy," Polliter retorted. "You are changed. I noticed it as soon as you began to talk in here."

Gaspard half closed his eyes. "Perhaps I am," he replied, almost to himself. Then, as if in excuse: "It is one thing to plot and plan and vow revenge when one is in hell; but when one gets out of hell. . . . We were mad during those twenty years," he broke out suddenly, "and we had the delusions of madmen; and who can wonder? But now we have liberty, we—you and I—have become sane. It amounts to this: if we are to take any revenge worthy of the name on Courtois we shall add immeasurably to our risks, especially now that Black's death has come out. It is common sense; and the sooner we make a big, final haul, and split up for ever the better."

Polliter nodded in agreement. "That's been my opinion ever since I put on a decent suit of clothes again," he remarked. "But it's a queer 'turn-round' for you."

Gaspard gave an uneasy laugh. "I suppose it is," he answered. "The effect of mixing with decent people again, possibly. You and I cannot forget we were born gentlemen, Kit—whatever else the kinks in our natures and circumstances have superimposed upon us. I thought—and was glad—every spark of humane feeling had died within me. I was wrong. I would kill or torture Courtois with relish enough, even now; but if I hurt him,

I must hurt others. Yes, I am changed. Why, I talked with Courtois for half an hour—shook hands with him; and if we'd been in the middle of the Sahara I believe I'd only have blurted out, 'I am André Gaspard!'—just to watch his face.

"Courtois goes in terror of us, Kit; and that's almost revenge enough," continued Gaspard. "You should have seen him wince when I talked about convicts and New Caledonia; and when young Wyer gave an account of Black's death and that Kanaka story of three men being picked up from a South Sea island!

"Fact is, we are in a hole, Kit. I won't have him killed; and if I let him go he'll move heaven and earth to get us retaken, now that his suspicions have been aroused. And what is more, if I let him go scot-free I must break my vow, and that means my luck. I know it—I'm sure of it."

"As far as I am concerned," Polliter said, earnestly, "you can regard our compact at an end."

"Jean won't agree to that."

"Curse Jean! He's broken faith—on your own showing. Let him slide, he deserves it."

"How much money have you left?" Gaspard inquired, abruptly.

"About four hundred."

"That won't last you for ever. No! Jean is

necessary to us. We have the brains, but he has the fingers; and in the big thing I have in my mind we shall need those clever digits of his."

"Who is Courtois, Andy?" Polliter put the question in some trepidation. His leader had a knack of resenting even the most justifiable inquisitiveness.

"His name is Gautil," Gaspard replied, a grim flicker of amusement crossing his face. "You and Jean relieved him of three pictures and other valuable trifles only a short while back."

Polliter's face was a study in amazement. Presently he gave vent to a low whistle. "Phew!" he exclaimed. "D'you think Jean suspects? Is that why he went back to Janesford?"

"Ah! I never thought of that! You mean he suspects me!—my good faith! The little fiend! . . . but what was he doing in the Hall?"

"No money—no food. After the larder," Polliter replied in jerks. "But, Andy, if Courtois is Gautil, he's a 'crook'!"

"Yes," Gaspard agreed, "I tumbled to it because he's done his level best to keep our little affair dead secret."

"I noticed that, too," Polliter replied; "there wasn't a word about it in the papers. But I went by the pictures."

"The pictures!"

"Yes. Didn't you recognise them? I meant to tell you, but we started on other things."

"I know they were masterpieces. I took your word for that—and the 'little Dutchman's' cheque" —with a laugh.

"Yes, but they're the pictures stolen from the Louvre a few months ago! There's a full description of them in that art periodical on the table—" He broke off in some astonishment, for Gaspard had leant back in his chair and was laughing unrestrainedly. At length Gaspard controlled himself.

"I haven't laughed like that for over twenty years," he gasped. "Gad! but it does one good. He's a clever fellow, Kit," he went on more seriously. "But we've scared him. He's cleared that museum of his—got rid of his collection—his collection! I'll wager there was a good percentage of it which the police would have given their pensions to get hold of.

"Well, they won't have a chance now. His wife told me he intends putting a billiard table in the room. He'll only leave what he's not afraid for any one to see. But we'll bleed him, Kit. . . . Get a chair, and let Jean go to blazes for the present."

Polliter did as he was bidden. He had been not a little puzzled by Gaspard's curious, "uneven" behaviour throughout the interview; and he now felt distinctly relieved when his leader suddenly reverted to the curt, cut-and-dried method of instruction to which he was accustomed.

For nearly half an hour Gaspard drilled his subordinate in all the details with which it was essential he should be acquainted. Finally, Gaspard "commanded":

"You will go down to Seckley Cottage by the 6 A.M. train from Paddington to-morrow. Insist on an interview with Gautil. Intimate that on behalf of Lord Janesford you have come to offer Seckley Cottage to Gautil for £5000 paid there and then—the price to include Lord Janesford's consent to the marriage of his son with Celeste Gautil."

"Suppose Gautil refuses?" Polliter objected. "The last thing he'd want would be the publicity the marriage would bring him. Besides, in any case, he'd make out the cheque to Lord Janesford."

Gaspard frowned; he detested being caught tripping. It occurred to him that the ridiculous omission to take the cheque difficulty into consideration was part and parcel of the subtle change he had undergone. He was savagely conscious

that recently his brain had played him tricks; and his confidence in himself had received no slight shock therefrom. But to his subordinate he said sarcastically:

"Bah! you have no brains, Kit. You will retort that certain information having come to his lordship concerning three valuable—er—missing—paintings, he—(or you)—would be extremely reluctant to be compelled to pass that information on to those who would be only too eager to pay for it. As for the cheque: it is quite possible he may have ready money in the house; if not a cheque will be made payable to 'bearer.' It would not be advisable—you will explain—for Lord Janesford's name to appear in the matter. If Gautil—Courtois—still jibs admit brazenly that you are there on your own account, that Lord Janesford's name was merely a 'blind.' Do you understand?"

"Yes, but——"

"There are no 'buts.' You will go"—with finality; then: "There is a reward out, I take it?"

"Twenty thousand francs. Here, I'll get you the paper where I saw it." Polliter rose to go to the table, but on the way he glanced out of the window and stopped. "There's Jean," he exclaimed.

Gaspard sprang up and joined him, and for a few

moments they watched an undersized, "seedy"-looking man who was loitering on the steps of the Museum. Even at this distance it could be seen that the fellow was furtively scanning the passers-by.

"Yes, it's Jean," Gaspard snarled. "Fetch him in."

Polliter hesitated. He disliked beyond measure the thought of Jean learning of his comfortable quarters, but a glance at Gaspard's face told him that the old, well-known danger signal once more was flying, and he at once picked up his silk hat and left the room.

Gaspard watched him pass into the courtyard of the Museum and approach Jean. The gesture with the hand for recognition was given and returned; then, after a short conversation, Polliter returned with the little man lagging at his elbow. Gaspard smiled grimly; he could well understand Jean's reluctance to appear in his presence.

When the two men entered the room they found Gaspard standing in a domineering attitude before the fire. Jean made an effort to put on a jaunty expression, but he failed dismally, and at a motion from Gaspard he stood by the table, nervously plucking at his fingers. His eyes were bloodshot and he looked "pinched" and in need of both food

and rest. Polliter closed the door, and then, as if he had no further interest, lit a cigarette, and settled himself in the chair by the window.

"Why are you late?" Gaspard demanded.

"Just got here," Jean rasped out, glancing at his boots, which were dirty and disreputable. "No money—had to tramp it."

"What were you doing in Janesford Hall?"

"Tryin' to warn you," returned the little man sullenly. Then, in a jerky whine: "Yes, I was. You listen. I'd 'blued' almost all my share—I didn't know what to do—there were rabbits and pheasants in those woods—I lived on them for two days after we did that job, and it was a safe place to lie by.

"I spent the last of my money on a ticket to Worcester—did the first journey again. I'd got as far as those big gates by the river—you know the place I mean—when a man came up behind me, and, after stoppin' a bit, went up the avenue. I guessed he was up to somethin', for he muffled his footsteps—you know the way. It was foggy, and I couldn't see him; but I tracked him easy enough.

"Well, he stopped for a minute or two in front of a door with a lantern in the porch, and I thought he was 'straight' after all. But he wasn't; for he

slipped through some bushes and through an opening in a thick hedge. I waited, and then followed. I lost him for some time.

"There was a light in one window, and after a bit I saw a man's head and shoulders against the light. He'd climbed up, and was listenin' to what was goin' on inside. He was a fattish little fellow, and I could see the outline of his face plainly enough to recognise him after, anyhow. Well, I watched him till he dropped from the window and made off down to the river, and I followed him; for, thinks I, 'he's a "crook" or a 'tec; and, anyway, I'm goin' to see where he goes now.'

"If he was a 'tec, y'see," Jean explained, "I reckoned he was on the lay after us for the job we'd just done. Well, I followed him till he got to the bridge at Beaudelay and there he stopped, talkin' with a 'copper.' I couldn't get very near; but at last I heard the 'copper' call out: 'Good-night, Mr. Faver,' and then I hooked it myself back up into those woods." Jean paused, as if out of breath.

"Go on," Gaspard commanded, though with less severity of tone. "You may sit down, if you like."

Jean seated himself with a sigh of relief. "There's a clearin' high up in the woods," he

continued, gaining a little of his old jaunty assurance, "where you can see a goodish bit of what's goin' on round about down below. Well, I was lookin' down towards the river one afternoon, when I saw a boat with two people in it; and on the bank, slinkin' after it, there was a man. I got interested, and I cut quickly down to the river and watched from behind a bush.

"Well, guv'nor"—Gaspard let the forbidden term pass—"you were in the boat—with a woman. I wasn't sure at first, but I was when I saw your bare arms. I've seen 'em and felt 'em often enough to know——"

"Go on!" Gaspard rapped out.

"Well, the little fellow watchin' you had a fishin' rod, but he wasn't fishin' for fish. He was after you—and I could almost swear he was the man I'd seen at the window—Mister bloomin' Faver! He followed you back up-stream—and I followed him. You cut up to the house Kit and I had 'worked,' and I cut up slowly through the woods.

"You passed me a bit later goin' along the road in a dog-cart with another man, and, as I'd seen two men in a dog-cart turn out of the big gates of that avenue earlier in the afternoon, I made a guess where you were livin'. Anyway, though there

was a moon as bright as day that night, I came to try and find you—and give you the wheeze. And all I got was this," Jean concluded, raising his hands significantly to his throat.

But if Jean expected sympathy or regret from his leader, he was vastly mistaken. At the name "Faver," Gaspard started and uttered a smothered oath; now he was striding up and down the room with a face as black as a thunder-cloud. He had received yet another shock to his self-confidence.

Fool that he had been to dismiss from his mind as of no account Trevor Wyer's anecdote of the somnolent angler upon the island—the little man who, with all the paraphernalia of the fisherman about him, had met them near the Janesford avenue gates and wished them a cheerful good-night.

"Mr. Faver" was his name! a retired linen-draper! on a holiday!

Polliter's simulated disinterest had long given place to a rigid attention. Though he had not Gaspard's knowledge of all the details, he understood enough to realise the possible seriousness of the position.

"Faver!—Faver!" he burst out suddenly. 'Can he be Faverol?—old Lavigne's rival—he's

a small, stoutish man, I know. Say, Andy! Is he after us, or——"

"Silence!" roared Gaspard, wheeling round on him. . . . "Yes, give him some, if you've got any"—for Jean had also interrupted with a faint demand for food, and it was obvious that the little man was on the verge of a collapse.

Polliter produced a tin of biscuits and a half-filled bottle of sherry from the sideboard and placed them upon the table. Without a word of thanks, Jean pounced upon the food, almost choking himself in his hunger. It occurred to Polliter, eyeing his comrade with open disgust, that of the two, Courtois and Jean, he despised and detested Jean the more. Courtois, at least (Polliter remembered), had possessed the semblance and the manners of something like a gentleman.

Meanwhile, though neither he himself nor his companions were aware of the fact, a strange thing had happened to Gaspard. It had occurred twice or thrice before; on each occasion, while he had been keeping midnight vigil in his bedchamber at Janesford Hall, when his brain had been surcharged, as it were, with thoughts of the past, the present, and the future.

For several moments his mind became an absolute blank. He stood quite still, with head

erect and eyes wide open as if in thought; but, for him, there was a lacuna—a void—both in thought and in time; in effect, he had lost all consciousness.

"Guv'nor!" Jean put in quietly. The wine had revived him, and there was just a trace of insolence in the question. "Have you found him?"

Gaspard took no notice.

"Shut up, you fool," Polliter growled, in sneering tones. "D'you think Courtois would advertise where he lives in the papers?"

"He found 'the little Dutchman,'" Jean insisted doggedly. "And you leave me alone!"

Gaspard seemed to wake up.

"Ah! 'the little Dutchman'—Van Langenberg," he murmured, smiling cynically. "We, the 'Invisibles,' started him upon the road of prosperity. Now that we are in distress, shall he not come to our assistance? Comrades! we will demand it. . . . Attention!" Face, voice, and manner had changed with almost melodramatic suddenness. The old André Gaspard was himself again, issuing in cold, level tones his rigid instructions for a last grand coup.

The instructions had been given, repeated, and understood. Not the tiniest detail had been overlooked. Polliter and Jean were silent. Had questions been allowed, they would have asked

none. They were awed afresh by their leader's grim personality—nay, more: both had suddenly found active terror for the basilisk-like face which confronted them.

But Polliter and Jean regarded the plan from different standpoints: Polliter—as the final effort to obtain the means to pass the remainder of his life in ease and obscurity; Jean—as but a stop-gap on the fruits of which he could renew an existence of debauchery, while his leader ransacked the world for Hippolyte Courtois.

Gaspard put on his overcoat. "Jean will not leave this room until you return," he said decisively to Polliter, as he picked up his hat, smoothed it with his sleeve, and moved towards the door.

"But, Andy!—" Polliter expostulated. He thought, naturally enough, that the instructions given him before Jean's arrival would now have been entirely revoked.

"I see no reason to alter anything," Gaspard retorted, "except that when we have interviewed Van Langenberg, I promise Jean three minutes with Hippolyte Courtois."

Polliter gasped—stared—swore violently. He was completely mystified by his leader's *volte-face*.

"Guv'nor!" screamed Jean, in an ecstasy of

joy, springing to his feet and rushing across the room.

But Gaspard had shut the door in his face; and, presently, an elderly gentleman emerged upon the street, slowly rounded the corner past the Plough Tavern, and hailed a passing hansom cab.

CHAPTER XIV

WITH BOTH HANDS

IT has never been claimed for the Hon. Trevor Wyer that he possessed anything approaching keen perceptions; it was his nature to accept effects without bothering himself to hunt for the causes which produced them. This characteristic, no doubt, while enabling him to step out blithely on life's journey, yet tended to send him along roads which a more subtle man would have seen at once were but side-tracks and not the broad highway. In other words Wyer was a normal, somewhat happy-go-lucky, healthy young fellow, not gifted (or should it be cursed?) with an excess of brains.

For two days he pondered over Heron's parting words, and ruefully, but without the slightest venom, "hanged" his recent guest for not being more explicit. He could not understand how Heron could possibly be "in the way" at Janesford; though there could be no mistaking what

meaning his friend had intended to convey Again, Heron's pledge to remove the possible objections of a refractory parent was equally vague.

How could Heron influence Gautil, to whom he was, practically, a complete stranger? If it came to that why should Gautil have any objections? In spite of his "democratic notions" Wyer could not help being conscious of a pride of family; it was born in him; and it was entirely without snobbishness. And he was a man-of-the-world enough to know that as the future Lord Janesford he was not, from a worldly standpoint, an "ineligible" to any family.

Besides, Wyer had that consciousness, the best and the least conceited of all; the consciousness of a clean mind in a wholesome body, which, allied with love, is the finest offer man can make to woman. It is all that really matters.

Unfortunately, woman herself has the prerogative of choice.

"Seize your happiness with both hands," Heron had said. That exhortation, at any rate, was easy enough to understand; but there are many lovers, bold in everything else under the sun, who find they have acquired a shy timidity on trying to put such praiseworthy advice into practice. Love is blind—a commonplace, and

one which is considered hardly worth saying; and possibly that is the reason why the truth of it is so constantly forgotten.

Wyer, however, was not altogether blind. He saw but too plainly that Celeste's manner towards him had changed adversely. Before that confounded burglary affair she had been open and, despite occasional wordy warfare, friendly—in fact, all that he could reasonably desire. Then she had appeared to be little removed from the "flapper" stage; and, unconsciously in love as Wyer had been, he had been content to wait. Now she seemed to have become a woman, had become reserved, and evidently disinclined for his society.

Keen-witted in this much, Wyer instinctively recognised a subtle antagonism where Mrs. Gautil only saw a maidenly fortification against love's assault. Had it not been so, it is probable that he would not have needed Heron's encouragement to take the fort by storm.

As it was, he foolishly made up his mind that he had better "chuck it"—as he had informed Heron—and clear off again to the Colonies. He came to this definite conclusion while eating his breakfast, though truth compels the admission that his breakfast did not suffer thereby.

There was nothing of the dyspeptic, languishing

lover about Lord Janesford's heir; indeed, he experienced wholesome thrills, almost a kind of nostalgia, at the thought of living once again the joyous, untrammelled life "under a boundless sky, in a boundless land." But under it all was the healthy man, awakened to his manhood, and longing for the mate of his choice to share that free life with him and redouble the sweetness by her presence.

"Oh, it's the deuce and all!" Wyer said out loud as he reached for his old briar and began to stuff the tobacco into its charred bowl. The pipe alight, he glanced at his watch.

He had an engagement during the morning to meet Farmer Pountney and one of the Janesford tenants at Penny Farm, for the purpose of adjusting a trivial dispute connected with the repair of a boundary wall.

Everything has a knack of going wrong at the same time. On entering the stable courtyard a little later, Wyer found fresh cause for growling against fate. Tom, the stable-lad, was tussling with Primrose, who was objecting most forcibly to being harnessed to the dog-cart. The lad had never been able to manage the mare, and even as Wyer called out to him to be more gentle the animal kicked out against the shaft and lamed herself.

It was soon evident that Primrose was in no fit condition to be driven; and, highly incensed, Wyer led her back to her loose-box and rendered her first aid. If his friend, Heron, was, as he had averred, "almost a doctor," Wyer certainly could lay justifiable claim to being a "vet."

The accident was most annoying; not only was Primrose a valuable animal and the apple of her owner's eye, but he realised that he would need to hurry if he were to keep his appointment on time. By road this was now impossible, and Wyer quickly determined that he must go by river.

Little more than half an hour later, after a strenuous pull up-stream, he made fast his boat under the dead oak tree at Folley bend and set off up through the belt of woodland to Penny Farm. Here, yet another cause for complaint awaited him, and only his respect and fondness for russet-cheeked old Mrs. Pountney prevented a very unusual explosion of temper.

Pountney, it appeared, had gone an hour ago to Beaudelay market. He and the other disputant over the wretched boundary wall had come to terms, and Pountney had fully expected to meet Wyer on the road, and so save him, at any rate, part of an unnecessary journey.

Mollified enough to accept a glass of cider, Wyer

inquired after Mrs. Aubertin, and learnt that she had not yet come downstairs, having breakfasted in bed.

The farmer's dame became voluble over her lodger's poor state of health and her recent breakdown; and, with the disconcerting frankness of the countryside, she said bluntly what, in her opinion, was responsible for the lady's condition. . . .

"And she is but young yet, Master Trevor," Mrs. Pountney added, with a sigh reminiscent of a night which had taxed her powers of sympathy to the utmost. "But the poor soul's had a mort o' trouble, I'm afraid; and, p'raps, it's God A'mighty's way o' doin' His very best for her, did she but know it."

At that moment, hearing the sound of horses' hoofs, Wyer caught sight of Hatt's head and shoulders and whip over a hedge, and he managed to escape further gossip. Hastening along the short farm road to the highway, he found Mrs. Gautil, who had come in the victoria to fetch Mrs. Aubertin for a drive.

Something in Wyer's face aroused Mrs. Gautil's sympathy; it seemed to her that the young man had expected, or rather hoped, that she would not have been alone. With sympathy came maternal instincts also, and a sudden determi-

nation to go her own way for once, her husband notwithstanding.

"Celeste," she remarked, flushing prettily, "detests the victoria; so, you see, if it wasn't for Mrs. Aubertin, I should have to keep myself company. I believe," she added artlessly (Oh! Mrs. Gautil) "Celeste intended to go out in her boat. I am a little nervous for her sometimes; but she does so love the river, and it seems a pity for her not to take full advantage of it while she can."

"Yes," Wyer admitted gravely, "it is a gorgeous day. And it may be the last chance she will get this year."

"I did not mean that," Mrs. Gautil replied, lowering her voice. "I think," she went on, lightly touching Wyer's hand resting on the door of the carriage near her, "I think my husband intends taking us all abroad very soon."

Wyer looked puzzled; then suddenly he understood that the gentle little lady was being very, very kind to him.

"Thank you," he said simply; then—he couldn't help it: "you are a brick!" he murmured, with boyish fervour.

Mrs. Gautil smiled, but she pulled down her veil to conceal the mistiness that threatened to cloud her eyes.

"Will you go and tell Mrs. Aubertin I am here?" she said quickly. "And don't—don't trouble to come back with her. She will forgive you."

Wyer raised his hat, and departed on his errand. As he turned, his glance fell upon Hatt. The man's broad back was rigid as a statue, but his head was nodding ever so slightly and the ghost of a grin played about his wide mouth. It seemed that Hatt approved of something; and Wyer, somehow, easily forgave him for momentarily forgetting his "place."

It often occurs that, when a man is driven to exasperation by the contrariness of things in general, he is tempted to dare Fate to do its worst. And in a fatalistic sort of way he risks a last throw, where in more normal moments he would have waited until his luck appeared less implacable.

The irritating events of the morning, following his resolution to throw up the sponge and emigrate again to the Colonies, had made Trevor Wyer as unlike his jolly, normal self as he could possibly be. Mrs. Gautil's obvious hint—and, strangely enough, Hatt's silent approval of something or other—had come at the psychological moment.

As Mrs. Pountney with slight exaggeration told her husband later, "Master Trevor came rushin' back, and called to me to tell Mrs. Aubertin the

kerridge was waitin' for her in the road; and then went off in a tearin' hurry down to the river. Any other man, and I'd a' said he was drunk on the one glass o' cider I'd given him."

And old Farmer Pountney, being just a little "market-peart" himself, and fearing his spouse would notice it, had replied, "Well, I never," slapped his thigh and demanded, guilefully, to be told it all over again.

As a matter of fact Wyer had forced the pace, and he had been somewhat incoherent in delivering instructions to Mrs. Pountney. Though not from the effects of the thin, harsh farm cider, his brain certainly was not in its ordinary working condition. What he thought about as he slogged up-stream in his heavy old craft, savagely attacking each ford without a single "breather," it would be hard to say. He never remembered afterwards.

Knowing that if Celeste Gautil had come down-stream, she would not have ventured below the famous long ford, he kept his eyes fixed astern until he saw the tall willows on the tail of the island well abreast of the boat. Then he glanced eagerly around. A brightly varnished dinghy, which he recognised with a queer thrill, was beached on the shingle at the top end of the island.

With noiseless strokes, Wyer pulled on, beached

his own boat alongside its dainty comrade, and sprang out. An idea occurred to him. With a grim expression, he picked up the sculls from both boats and hid them in a ditch behind some bushes a few yards away. Then he climbed up the narrow foot-track to the little tableland. It was deserted. He began to walk round the edge, searching the nooks between the willows.

He had almost made a complete tour round the plateau when he came upon her lying face downwards, her head pillowed on her arms, in a secluded hollow concealed by a hawthorn thicket. She was wearing the brown holland dress in which he had first seen her; the familiar pink sunbonnet lay at her side.

The soft, spongy moss-turf had muffled his footsteps; and, for a moment, Wyer thought she was asleep. Then, suddenly, his understanding quickened; he knew that her attitude was full of the abandon of unhappiness; and, almost guiltily, he retreated silently to the other side of the island.

"Hulloa!" he shouted. His voice sounded unnatural, and almost broke. He called out again.

Presently he saw her emerge from the hollow. She caught sight of him and stood still. He went quickly towards her.

"Celeste," he said, and stopped. A quick

flash of welcome had come into her brown eyes, to be veiled instantly by a shy, comprehending alarm caused by his use of her name, and by what she could not help seeing in his face.

"Celeste?" he repeated.

Her colour came and went. "Oh, why have you come?" she asked, in a low, troubled voice.

"You know," he replied. He had lost all his boyishness. His direct gaze was kind, yet, in a way, implacable. As he stood firmly before her he resembled a certain Janesford ancestor who, it was said, on entering the boudoir of his obstinate lady-love, had locked the door, and refused to open it again, until he had received the answer for which he craved.

"Celeste!" he said again. "Now that I have come, will you send me away?"

She struggled to find her voice, but could not.

"Why have you avoided me lately?" he demanded. "What has changed you?"

Still she remained silent; and her eyes, filling with tears, fell.

"You little goose!" he whispered with tender raillery. "Look up, sweetheart! Look up, and say you hate me. You cannot."

With a swift stride forward he took her bodily into his arms. For a brief second he felt her yield;

his hand sought her hair, and with gentle pressure compelled the face upwards. Then he kissed her upon the lips.

She broke from his embrace with a piteous cry. "Oh!—don't—I cannot bear it!"

"Cannot bear it?" he retorted gaily; "cannot bear being told that I love you?"

"Oh! don't you understand?" She sank down upon the grass, and hid her face.

Puzzled, he gazed down at her. "No, I don't," he said simply. "All that I understand is that I love you"—his voice shook a little and became very gentle—"but child, if I am causing you pain—if you cannot—oh!" he burst out, "put me out of my misery—and send me away. I can bear it, but it will be torture for a bit."

"I am ashamed," she murmured. With an effort, she faced him bravely. "Will you listen?" she asked. "I must tell you. Oh! it hurts; but you must hear—then—if I am wrong—if you despise me—you can go."

"Nothing can make me despise you," he replied.

It was a pitiful little avowal. Loyalty to a father, and a rigid code of right and wrong warring against, and even conquering, a better instinct of the heart.

When the girl had told her father how she had

found Trevor Wyer in Hatt's room at midnight, Gautil had at first scoffed at the idea of a burglary. But he had gone on to make other remarks which were enigmatical. His words were not a direct accusation; in fact, had he been taxed with the question, he would have denied any such intention; and the words themselves, at a pinch, would have borne him out.

Nevertheless, fearing the prominence into which the marriage of his daughter to Lord Janesford's son would bring him, and seeing in the burglary a way to estrange the young people, Gautil had, perforce and deliberately, hinted to Celeste that Trevor Wyer had succumbed to a sudden temptation, and had been caught by Hatt in the act.

Hatt, it would seem, with the best intentions and because of a liking for Wyer, had tried to cloak him, with his master's subsequent approval. But, of course, Celeste was led to understand the intimacy which had grown up must be checked. Also, her father had made her see plainly that she must necessarily keep silence on the matter.

To give Gautil his due, his necessary cruelty to his daughter had gone against the grain; but he was cornered; and a choice of evils seemed to be the only way to get clear. He did not realise the

depth of Celeste's feelings towards the man he maligned. After all, he thought, she was but a child, and would soon forget him.

This morning, just as Celeste was getting ready to go down to the river, her father had called her into his study. He had noticed her behaviour towards Trevor Wyer, and he applauded what he called her good sense. He did not refer again to his veiled objections to the young man; but he told her that he had definitely arranged to leave the neighbourhood very soon and go abroad with his family.

In the plan, Celeste had divined nothing but kindness towards herself. She knew it was the best possible thing for her—if Wyer were guilty; but at the thought of separation from him, soon—and for ever—her heart rose up in arms and rebelled. Guilty or not, she loved him. Could she bear to leave him?

The interview with her father at an end, she had gone down to her beloved river, hastened to the island, there to fling herself upon the grass and fight her young battle in solitude. Oh if he would but come to her! . . . And now he had come—and she could not send him away were he guilty a thousand times over. But her sturdy young heart had told her that she must be the accuser,

even though he, when he had listened to her, were to—ah! dear God! what would he do?

The halting recital came to an end. She could not look at him, and she feared because of his silence.

Celeste was acutely conscious of Trevor's motionless figure standing close behind her. Then she felt a hand lightly rest upon her hair.

"Celeste," he said quietly, "I love you. Do you love me? Answer, child!"

The girl hesitated quivering. "Yes," she whispered at last—"I love you."

"Nothing else matters?"

"No."

"Even if I were a thief?"

"Oh! you know it. Yes—yes—yes," she cried piteously. "Oh! I am ashamed"—a wild flood of tears checked her utterance.

Wyer sat down beside her and again took her into his arms. This time she lay there passive—broken. He caressed her hair with tender fingers.

"You little goose!" he chided her, while happiness made his voice ring. "I am no thief. Look up! Look into my eyes and see. You poor darling kiddie! What a rotten shame! What a rotten time you must have had!"

No bitter scorn; no reproachful, "How could

you believe it of me!" He could think only of her; self was forgotten. Just Trevor Wyer all over!

But there was no need for the girl to search into his eyes. Her own heart leaped suddenly in the full consciousness of the truth. With gentle insistence she freed herself from his encircling arms, and, kneeling before him, placed her two hands upon his shoulders. For a brief second, limpid, brown, tearful eyes met those of clear, joyous blue. A hot colour suffused the dainty sun-tan of her face, and spread downwards to the perfect column of her bare throat and neck.

Then she bent slowly forward and kissed him.

CHAPTER XV

KIT POLLITER "SELLS A PUP" TO M. FAVEROL

"A GENTLEMAN to see you, sir," announced the elderly, unprepossessing parlour-maid, appearing at the door of her master's study about eleven o'clock in the morning.

"Name?" Gautil demanded.

"He would not give one, sir; but he said that his business was very important."

"H'm. Show him in."

Gautil had been expecting the interruption. A few minutes previously, glancing up from the antique bureau at which he was seated writing a letter to Lord Janesford, he had seen a tall man in a long drab overcoat and a Homburg hat approach the house and pass by outside the window towards the front door.

Strange visitors at Seckley Cottage were a rarity at any time; but now Gautil had additional reasons for being upon the alert. He had a vague feeling of uneasiness, amounting almost to foreboding.

Presently the maid returned and ushered in the stranger, who waited until the door had been closed again; then he advanced to the middle of the room with an ingratiating "Good morning, Mr. Gautil," which somewhat seemed at variance with his general outward bearing of self-assurance.

"Morning," Gautil responded curtly.

The stranger gave a deprecatory cough. "Er—can I speak without fear of being overheard?" he inquired hesitatingly. "It is, I may say, a somewhat delicate subject."

Gautil shrugged his shoulders. He had revised his first impression that this was a police officer, past or present. Probably the fellow was merely a professional "cadger," a commercial tout; it mattered not what. Inwardly, Gautil was much relieved; but his relief only served to make him the less inclined to waste courtesy.

"So far as I am concerned," he said roughly, "I know of nothing you may not shout out on the housetops. I've——"

The stranger interrupted him quickly. "My employer would not like that," he observed gravely, to all appearances taking Gautil's words in their literal meaning, "and before I proceed, I must ask you to pledge yourself not to divulge—er—what I have to put before you. I come, I may

say, on behalf of Lord Janesford." He placed enough emphasis upon the name to show that he regarded it as a talisman, and felt confident that Gautil would do likewise.

Lord Janesford's name had its effect. Gautil's manner changed at once. "Lord Janesford!" he exclaimed, in genuine surprise. "Of course, anything you may say on behalf of his lordship I shall regard in strict confidence. His solicitor? But sit down—sit down."

"Not his usual one—unfortunately for myself," the stranger replied with a bow. He moved a chair nearer to the bureau, and seated himself in a professional attitude.

"Some time ago," he went on, "you made his lordship an offer of £3000 for this—er—delightful property. His lordship, at the time, could not—er—bring himself to part with this particular portion of the Janesford estate; and—er—he realises—er—that, perhaps, he expressed his disinclination in somewhat too—er—forcible terms.

"Lord Janesford, Mr. Gautil, suffers from—er—gout. An affliction most trying to the temper; and—er—I feel sure that you—er—bear no resentment.

"Very well, then. In view of the fact that should—shall we say?—a mutual attraction be-

tween two young people be allowed to take its natural course, this property would not—er—as it were, go out of the family—you take me?—his lordship is inclined to withdraw his objections not only to the sale, but also (er—forgive me, you will understand that Lord Janesford had other views with regard to his son's future), but also, then, to waive any objections he may naturally entertain towards the match between the Honourable Trevor Wyer and—er—Miss Gautil.

"Ahem! I may say—er—between ourselves, that his lordship finds himself at the present time exceedingly embarrassed—er—on the score of—er—(a vulgar word!) cash. That is to say, he is in immediate need of the sum of £5000. That being so, he has instructed me to state that he is prepared to accept £5000 for this property, providing, Mr. Gautil, that I take—er—the cheque back to him direct from this interview.

"There you have the reason for and the object of my informal, and—er—anonymous—shall we say?—visit, in a nutshell."

The stranger flicked a speck of dust from his knees, then, with finger-tips joined, he leant back in his chair, as if willing to listen to objections, but confident in his ability to confute them with sound argument.

Throughout the recital Gautil remained immovable, scrutinising his visitor through half-closed eyelids. At its conclusion, a flicker of cynical amusement came into his face.

"I have no intention of purchasing Lord Janesford's objections," he remarked, urbanely, but dwelling pointedly upon the last word. "But, as I have already informed him, I am prepared to forfeit £500 if he will release me from my obligations with regard to this property."

Here Gautil told a deliberate untruth. Already he had begun to suspect the credentials of this self-styled emissary of Lord Janesford, and had determined to lay a trap by which to test him.

The stranger shook his head. "In the circumstances," he observed drily, "his lordship would prefer the larger sum."

"No doubt," Gautil retorted. "By the way," he asked carelessly, "when did you receive your instructions from his lordship?"

"The day before yesterday."

"Personally?"

"Certainly. Lord Janesford went most fully into the case."

"What did he say with regard to my letter to him, offering to forfeit the £500?"

The stranger smiled. "Er—his lordship is at

present a martyr to his ailment," he replied evasively. "My former answer, that the larger sum would be preferred, is, perhaps, a little more—er—amenable—than the actual words used by his lordship."

Gautil also appeared to gather some amusement from the situation, but his sense of humour was sardonic. He could have informed this evident impostor that the letter to Lord Janesford under discussion still reposed in the top drawer of the bureau, as yet but half-written.

"I think," he said, pleasantly enough, "we shall do no good by prolonging this interview. And," he added, with just a trace of acerbity, rising and going towards the bell-rope hanging by the fireplace, "I trust you will not object to my saying that in future I prefer to treat direct with Lord Janesford, or through his son, Mr. Trevor Wyer, or the firm of solicitors he usually employs."

Before Gautil could reach the bell-rope, his visitor sprang to his feet and intercepted him.

"Patience, Mr. Gautil!" he begged. "If you will permit me, I can prove to you that Lord Janesford is acting most wisely—and with very great consideration for yourself—in employing myself, an outsider, as it were, to act in this matter." The words were meticulously polite, but there was

something sinister, not to say threatening, in the stranger's manner.

"I have neither time nor inclination to listen," Gautil said coldly. "Kindly stand aside from the bell."

The stranger stood his ground firmly. "I hoped," he remarked, with every appearance of regret, "any unpleasantness might have been avoided; but I am pledged to follow out my instructions." Then his voice changed, and became curt and insistent. "What about the loss you suffered from this house recently?" he demanded.

In a flash all his former uneasiness returned to Gautil, and for a moment or two he was at a loss how to counter what was obviously intended for an attack. How did the stranger know of the recent burglary?

No mean judge of men (as, indeed, he had to be of necessity), Gautil was positive that Trevor Wyer had told no one of the affair but Heron. Hatt, too, was to be trusted implicitly. Therefore, either Heron had informed Lord Janesford, who had sent this man to blackmail him, or the fellow had come on his own account, in which case he must in some way be connected with the thieves themselves!

If the latter solution were correct, how came he to know so much of Gautil's private connection with Lord Janesford? Possibly, nay, probably, Wyer had told Heron, who— Ah! Who was this Heron? Nothing was known of him, save that he was a chance friend of the Hon. Trevor Wyer, picked up on a voyage from Australia.

Fired with alarming suspicions by Heron's own admissions, and still further by Wyer's narrative concerning the death of a certain South Sea skipper, Gautil had sought, and sought in vain, to trace in Heron a likeness to André Gaspard, the one man in the world who could inspire him with fear. Because of that fear he had doggedly reassured himself.

But, now, suddenly Gautil realised his crass folly. With singular obtuseness he had not for one instant put it to himself that his visitor this morning might be connected with his suspicions of George Heron—that André Gaspard and his gang were once more at large.

In the first place, jumping to the conclusion that the stranger was some sort of police official, Gautil's forebodings were concerned for his "collection"; and especially for the three Louvre paintings which had, indeed, received unlawful harbourage within the "museum."

Then, in his relief caused by the mention of Lord Janesford, Gautil had become almost careless and, certainly, blind to possible and more serious issues. Now, renewed fear because of one man lent him clear-sightedness with regard to another. He sought for a certain other likeness in his visitor—and he thought he found it.

Curses on it! What a fool he had been! But at any rate he had never feared Kit Polliter; and there was always the chance that he, Gautil, had not been recognised, or—his instincts told him—he would not now be alive!

The consoling thought put Gautil on his mettle.

"I fail to understand you," he said in colourless tones.

"Let me explain," his visitor replied affably. As if conscious that Gautil would listen, he returned to his chair; and Gautil, after hesitating slightly, followed his example, inwardly highly pleased to be again within quick reach of the revolver which he kept ready for emergencies within the top drawer of the bureau.

"It has come to Lord Janesford's knowledge," the stranger continued, after a pause, "that three valuable paintings—er—masterpieces—were —er—stolen from this house recently. That,

in itself, of course, is of no consequence to Lord Janesford. Pray do not interrupt me," for Gautil had attempted to speak.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "his lordship has learnt—er—with regret, that these paintings were, in fact—er—none other than the three notorious masterpieces—er—missing from the Louvre in Paris—er—for which the—er—police have been vainly searching, and—er—for which a reward of, roughly, £1000 has been offered.

"Lord Janesford—er—has very natural reluctance to—er—undergo the publicity of—er—claiming this reward, especially having in consideration the—er—possible—shall we say?—fusion of the two families, yours and his own. Therefore, Mr. Gautil, I put it to you as a sensible man, will you not reconsider your refusal to purchase—er—this property?"

"And Lord Janesford's silence?" sneered Gautil. He could "act" when necessary. He was quite positive, now, that this was Kit Polliter. Van Langenberg had been right. The burglary was the work of André Gaspard and his gang. Polliter, Gautil recollected, had been remarkable for his knowledge as a connoisseur; without doubt he had recognised the paintings. And realising the significance of Gautil's possession of them,

Gaspard had despatched Polliter to work the double coup.

Polliter's acquaintance with Gautil's domestic affairs was easily explained: Heron had "drilled" him. Little doubt, now, that Heron was André Gaspard. A grim situation; but Gautil found a grain of comfort. At any rate, on the score of the pictures, he and Van Langenberg need have no fear of the police.

Somehow the thought brought a little extra courage. If only he, himself, had escaped recognition, he would win yet. His quick wits already had seized upon a plan for turning the tables upon his old enemies.

After taking time for reflection, the stranger replied indifferently, "Precisely; you spare me the —er—necessity of—er—words."

For a few moments Gautil simulated a troubled hesitation; then, with great, apparent reluctance, he opened the top drawer and inserted his hand.

"How shall I make the cheque out?" he inquired sulkily.

"To 'bearer'—unless by chance you have the purchase money in—er—notes."

"Well, I haven't," Gautil retorted savagely. Then, as if a thought had struck him: "But what proof have I that you are authorised

to receive the money on Lord Janesford's behalf?"

The stranger shrugged his shoulders. "My dear sir, you must see that 'proof' in this case, and in the—er—somewhat peculiar circumstances, would be very unwise. His lordship's name must be kept out of this matter altogether."

Gautil's face set hard. "Go back to Lord Janesford," he said quietly, gripping the revolver and prepared to make instant use of it, "and tell him from me—to be hanged! I have the honour to wish you 'Good morning.'"

Immediately the stranger discarded further pretence. "See here, old sport," he suggested, with insolent familiarity, "suppose we do keep his blooming lordship's name out of this?"

Gautil pointed significantly to the door.

"Suppose you and I do a deal," persisted the stranger.

"If you're not gone in one minute," Gautil replied, "I shall send for the police."

"Police!" jeered the other. "Not you! Not when I tell you I'm an ex-Scotland Yard man myself, eh? Have some sense. I've traced those pictures here. It means £1000 for me whenever I like to ask for it. Skittles! I'm out for 'brass.' Now, £5000 down, and I know nothing—

harmless as a kitten. Come! Call it a square deal."

Under cover of the bureau-top, Gautil withdrew his hand and slipped it behind his back; then, keeping his eye warily upon his visitor, he edged quickly to the bell-rope, and gave it a violent jerk.

To his surprise the stranger received the unexpected rebuff with composure. "Oh, well!" he remarked coolly, picking up his hat and rising to his feet, "if you will be a 'sawny,' it's your own lookout." Then, the maid appearing at the door, he resumed his professional manner, uttered a polite "Good morning," and briskly left the room.

Through the window Gautil watched his visitor stroll away out of sight. Suddenly he shook his fist. "Curse you!" he muttered, his sombre eyes blazing with fury and hate. "And you"—a momentary hesitation—"George Heron! Play-acting fools! You'd bleed me, would you? Bah! I'll send you and that other wizened little mummy back to your nickel mines!"

It would be easy. What if they had recognised him! He, at all events, had no fear of the police. Police! Bah! the fools! He would write at once a letter stating the facts fully to the police in Paris. He would avow openly that he was Hippolyte Courtois—was Arthur Allerton, the money-lender.

No harm could come of the admission. Then he would hurry to London, put the matter for the meantime in the hands of Scotland Yard, cable a warning to Van Langenberg, and slip away to Rotterdam and safety.

The police would understand his reasons for disappearing. He would emphasise the fact that he went in bodily fear of his life.

It seemed so simple that Gautil almost laughed. But, on attempting to put pen to paper, his shaking hand spoke eloquently of the shock he had sustained. He rang the bell again for the maid.

"Has your mistress come in yet?" he inquired.

"No, sir."

Gautil made an impatient exclamation. "What carriage did she take?"

"The victoria, sir. The mistress intended calling at the farm for Mrs. Aubertin."

"Send Miss Celeste to me."

"Miss Celeste went down towards the river an hour ago, sir."

"H'm. When Hatt comes in, tell him to put the horse in the brougham—at once; you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Bring a brandy and soda—and a biscuit."

Once more Gautil settled down to compose his letter. The brandy notwithstanding, his handwriting was still decidedly shaky.

Meanwhile, Polliter proceeded leisurely away from the house. He attached no importance to Gautil's threat of "police." The affair, he knew, was, as it were, "in the family." He had recognised Hippolyte Courtois almost at the beginning of the interview; but, deceived by Gautil's behaviour, he did not think that his own identity had been discovered.

Like his leader, Polliter had been curiously unaffected by the sight of the man whose treachery had thrust him into unspeakable misery for nearly twenty ghastly years. Now that the interview was, as he put it, a back number, his chief feeling was relief; for he considered that the attempt at blackmail had been a tactical blunder on Gaspard's part, and risky to the point of foolhardiness.

Polliter appreciated more than ever the inestimable value of his dearly regained liberty, and he pondered over Gaspard's strange see-sawing and his renewed intention of taking revenge upon Courtois with grave misgivings. In some way or another revenge was sure to react upon Gaspard, himself, and Jean. Moreover, to his own dismay, Polliter had begun to doubt Gaspard's

infallibility. His leader was altered. He no longer inspired implicit confidence.

It occurred to Polliter that it would be a plan worth accomplishing if he could get Gautil put away—beyond the reach of Gaspard; and, seeing that Gautil was undoubtedly "wanted," though unsuspected, by the police, it did not seem altogether impossible that he could be landed safely in gaol. The question was, how to bring about this desirable state of affairs! An anonymous hint to the police might have some effect.

It so happened that, while in this mood, on turning a corner, Polliter met a rotund, rosy-cheeked, chirpy little man who was proceeding in the opposite direction, and apparently finding a childlike pleasure in swishing his feet among the dead leaves lying in drifts at one side of the drive.

Primed by Jean's narrative, Polliter had been warily expectant of meeting just such a little fellow as this man appeared to be. If he were, indeed, the redoubtable Faverol, the encounter might be turned to account. There was a risk, of course; but for once Polliter's characteristic cautiousness was swamped by the project that had been simmering in his brain. At any rate, he would try to put a spoke in the wheel of Chance.

"Mr. Faver?" he inquired, halting abruptly.

The newcomer drew up with an affable smile. "That is my name," he admitted.

"Ah!" Polliter grumbled, lowering his voice and assuming a resentful, sulky expression. "I wasn't quite sure, but I guessed it was you. I heard in the village that was the name you went by, down here. But it's Monseer Faverol, ain't it?" This was a shot; and though it found the mark, Faverol withstood it well.

"You have the advantage of me," he replied a trifle stiffly.

Polliter swore. "Think so?" he retorted. "I reckon it's the other way round. Anyway, I wouldn't mind having your reputation. I'll lay a 'fiver' we're on the same 'lay'—worse luck! Private inquiry agent," he explained, tapping himself on the breast. "And I know your noble features well enough—seen you in gay 'Paree.' Going down below, aren't you?" he added, jerking his head towards the hidden Dower House.

With the disquieting thought that he had been forestalled, Faverol yet managed to smile pleasantly. "I was intending to pay a call, certainly," he said, "but——"

"But now I've gone and queered the pitch, eh?" Polliter interrupted; then significantly: "Here! I

know 'some,' but it ain't enough. You may be in the same box. What's a share worth?"

Faverol did happen to be "in the same box," but he saw no reason as yet to admit the fact; so he raised his eyebrows and stared blankly.

"Oh, cheese it!" Polliter went on vulgarly. "You're not here for fun—or fishing. Come on, now; I'll give you a pointer. In this blooming competition the missing word is 'Pictures.' . . . Half share worth £500—eh?"

Faverol blew out his cheeks. "Phoo! Pictures!" he exclaimed. "Be more explicit, my candid friend. What makes you so eager to share £1000 with me?"

"Because I've hashed things, and half a loaf's better than no bread," Polliter rejoined disgustedly. "I suppose, as usual, Monseer Faverol's got the whole blessed baker's cartload." He walked away in a huff.

Faverol called him back. "There is no need to get angry," he remarked. "Come, tell me, Mister——"

"Jacobs," sulkily.

"Mr. Jacobs: these pictures—they are famous?"

"Monseer Faverol wouldn't be here after tinted tuppeny post-cards."

Faverol acknowledged the implied compliment

with a charming bow. "Just so," he admitted. "And did these pictures at one time adorn the—the——"

"Oh, spit it out!" Polliter snapped irritably. "I see you've 'tumbled,' right enough. We're on the same lay, you and I. Oh, well, if you won't, I will. The Louvre—they were stolen from the Louvre in Paris; and I've traced 'em here; this Gautil had 'em——"

"How do you know that?"

"Because I've—I know some one who's seen 'em hanging bold as brass in a room down yonder."

"Then why did you not lay an information and get a search warrant?"

"Didn't I say that I'd hashed things? Think I'd want to share a 'snip' with any one if I hadn't? Here, if you won't make a bargain, I'm going straight off to lay an information now."

"I have not refused, my friend," Faverol observed in conciliatory tones. "All I wanted to point out was that it seemed a little premature to pay Mr. Gautil a visit, until you were quite certain what you were going for."

"You're going yourself, anyway."

"Ah! but then I, perhaps, may not make a hash of things. But wait"—Faverol assumed a fine air of candour—"I admit I, too, know 'some,' but not

enough. Answer me one question, and I may agree to share with you. What is this Gautil?"

"Ask me another," Polliter replied. "But I'll tell you this much. I marked him for an old 'lag' some time back, and that's what put me on his track. The pictures aren't all, either"—Polliter checked himself, as though he had realised he had been on the point of exceeding his share of the bargain, and added lamely—"anyway, he's an old 'lag.' You can sew your buttons on that."

The colloquy now seemed to hang fire; both men secretly wished to cut short the discussion; but both were compelled, for form's sake, to haggle a little. Finally, outwardly with no good grace, Faverol wrote on the back of an envelope an acknowledgment that: "In the event, etc. . . . and on condition that Mr. Jacobs did nothing further in the matter, etc. . . . he, Mr. Jacobs, was entitled to a half share of the 20,000 francs offered as a reward, etc. . . ."

Having pocketed this document and thrust upon Faverol in return a fictitious address in Camberwell, with the evident intention of appearing a wag, the sham inquiry agent wished the Frenchman "Olive-oil" and strolled away up the drive.

To all appearance Faverol's whole attention was centred upon Gautil, *i.e.*, Courtois; and if only

Faverol had something definite on which to bring a charge, the odds seemed to be in favour of Gautil's being speedily clapped into gaol, a consummation Polliter, whichever way he looked at it, devoutly desired. But nevertheless, once out of the drive gates, Polliter put his best foot foremost; proximity with a man of Faverol's parts was not to be unduly prolonged.

Somewhat elated now that his inspiration had been confirmed, Faverol continued on his way down towards Seckley Cottage.

It may be stated at once that he had not for a moment doubted Polliter's veracity. For this slackening of his usual alertness the little police agent's own vanity was largely responsible. It had been tickled by this vulgar, blundering "inquiry agent's" recognition of himself, and the fellow's obvious chagrin on discovering that he had the renowned Faverol for a rival.

"Naturally," Faverol preened himself, "discovering my presence in the neighbourhood, the fool lost his wits and took precipitate action."

On learning that he had been forestalled, a lesser man, probably, would have renounced his intended call upon Gautil; but Faverol, on the contrary, was more determined than ever to fix

his inquisitive eyes upon this old "lag." There were few old lags he would not recognise.

Gautil—to give a rogue his due—was no weakling. Seeing a second stranger, a small man, pass his window, his thoughts flew to Jean, "the Rat."

In the first few moments of the succeeding interview Faverol never guessed how near he came to sudden extinction. Only that his plump, rosy features could not—from the very first glance—by the longest stretch of imagination—be likened to a member of the rodent family, saved him from sharing the fate of his dead colleague, Manton; for Gautil had by no means forgotten Jean's predilection for violence, and, with a fatalistic conviction that he was cornered, he intended to shoot "on sight."

Gautil, therefore, experienced a surge of relief when Faverol introduced himself under his true colours. As it has been frequently stated, Gautil had scanty fears of the police on his own account, and he quickly came to the very natural conclusion that Faverol's visit need cause him little apprehension; on the contrary, it seemed highly probable that the little police agent was hard on the track of the "Invisibles."

It is easy to understand that this conclusion made Gautil the more positive that his first visitor

was Kit Polliter, and made him, figuratively speaking, welcome the French detective with open arms.

Faverol's next communication settled the matter beyond doubt. With many apologies for the alarm he might cause, he stated that he had traced a notorious gang of thieves to this neighbourhood, and hearing that Mr. Gautil possessed a "collection" of objects of vertu and value, he had hastened to bring a timely warning.

Gautil thanked him, and without waste of time proceeded to shed new light on the subject. His "collection," he said (in itself of little intrinsic value), need not be considered. It had been disposed of. But it was not his "collection," he feared, which had attracted the gang of thieves mentioned by Faverol. Their object was revenge preceded by extortion, and this letter (which he handed to Faverol for perusal) would give the facts of the case *in extenso*.

As he read the letter originally intended for his chief in Paris, Faverol's eyes and mouth—his whole face—became a round O of blank astonishment and consternation.

"Phoo!" he breathed out at last. "So you are Hippolyte Courtois? Phoo!"

Gautil nodded, though Faverol's remark had hardly been a question.

"And you say this George Heron staying at—at —let me see—Janesford Hall" (it will be seen that Faverol was recovering his wits, and, with them, his characteristic disinclination to admit knowledge) "is André Gaspard, the leader of three forçats recently escaped from New Caledonia. And that —er—Kit Polliter, another member of the gang, has been here this very morning—not half an hour ago—attempting to—Phoo! Incredible!"

Gautil produced a cutting from a Sydney newspaper which he had lost no time in obtaining in order to corroborate Trevor Wyer's narrative.

"Read that," Gautil said grimly. "But I should have thought that my recognition of two of them would have been enough for you. It is enough for me."

It was more than enough for Faverol. Inwardly, he was being consumed by the malignant little devils of rage and humiliation. He had been "gulled" by one of the very rascals by whose recapture he had hoped to raise himself to a pinnacle of professional fame. He had been recognised —his quarry alarmed—they would vanish—poof! into thin air—become the "Invisibles" in very truth. Heron return to Janesford! Pah! He was in London—in Paris—in Timbuctoo—laughing, no doubt, at him, Faverol.

And what was left? This Gautil—this Arthur Allerton—this Hippolyte Courtois—who obviously had told the truth.

But stay! Had he told all the truth? The burglary here: was it a myth? Polliter knew of it. Yes, but Wyer had told Heron; and Heron, being André Gaspard, had probably told his confederate, Polliter.

Yes; but was it the work of the "Invisibles" themselves? Such expert thieves would recognise the three pictures without doubt. And if the three pictures were not the famous missing masterpieces, it would, indeed, be extraordinary that Polliter should have had the same inspiration as he, Faverol, had experienced. Faverol was, really, marvellously keen witted; he came very near to guessing Polliter's reason for stopping him in the drive.

Decidedly, there had been a burglary, and this Gautil had some urgent reasons for trying to conceal that fact. But there was a chance that Gautil could explain. If, say, the pictures were (humiliating thought!) merely copies—if he had kept silence from fear of his old enemies—then he, Faverol, was a miserable failure—a simpleton—an imbecile. He had caught at a shadow and allowed the substance to elude him.

All these questions and answers seethed through Faverol's brain, while he appeared to be engrossed in a prolonged perusal of the discovery of the schooner *Coal Sack* in the far distant South Seas.

"The thought is indeed alarming," he said presently, handing back the newspaper cutting. "And I think you are right in your conclusions. Your one hope is that you yourself have not been recognised. When did you first realise that this—er—George Heron was André Gaspard?"

"Last Wednesday night," Gautil replied, with half a truth. "I found him dining here upon my return home."

"Phoo! Dining here! But had you no reason previously to suspect that these thieves, these enemies of yours, were in the neighbourhood?"

"None whatever." It would never do to admit the burglary until it was absolutely forced upon him.

Faverol renewed the attack. "H'm," he observed in self-reproof, pursing his lips, "that was an unnecessary question. But let me see, now; do you think the rascals came here, in the first instance with designs on your 'collection'—or was revenge on you their primary and only motive?"

"I could not say," Gautil answered.

"No? But you removed your collection before you recognised this Heron?"

Gautil assumed a puzzled expression; then his face cleared. "Yes, that is so," he admitted. "And, perhaps, it was as well that I did. As a matter of fact," he added carelessly, "I had intended to do so long ago. I wanted the room for a billiard room."

Faverol nodded, as though his thoughts had flitted elsewhere. Then, with the remark that time was precious, and an admonition to Gautil to rest tranquil now that he, Faverol, was watching over him, the little police agent made a hurried departure.

Half an hour later, not far beyond the drive gates, the brougham bearing Sebastien Gautil to Ardley Station, en route for London—and obscurity—picked up an unbidden passenger.

He was M. Faverol, whose one fear was that some vulgar urchins might discover him and gleefully holloa to Hatt to "Whip be'ind!"

CHAPTER XVI

IT IS "GOOD-BYE," COMRADES

ALL day long from the Hook to Rotterdam the intermittent blasts of steamers' sirens gave warning of the coming fog. Outside, unruffled by the tiniest catspaw, the North Sea brooded under a dense white pall; and, as night fell, there sprang up a gentle westerly breeze, which wafted the swirling drifts up the Maas and over the low-lying lands, and then, as if its mission had been accomplished, left the sea mist to redouble the darkness settling down upon the northern "City of Canals."

Gradually all water-borne traffic was suspended; the steamers' sirens became silent, giving place to the ghostly tinkle of invisible anchor bells.

The Ziegelstraat, having a reputation to maintain, seemed to have appropriated more than its share of the fog; and long before the labour for the day should have ceased, the hatch boards of the long barges had been banged down, the warehouses

closed, and the last lorry gone rumbling away over the cobblestones.

With the exception of the night watchmen, supposedly patrolling the wharves and the warehouses, Van Langenberg, perhaps, was the one individual who had not groped his way from the silent street. High up in his luxurious eyrie the 'little Dutchman' fretted through the long hours; nor could frequent visits to his cellar beneath the bed allay his restlessness.

A superb quarter-chiming ormolu clock under a glass dome gave out its melodious warning. A quarter to ten. Van Langenberg drained his glass; for the fiftieth time he picked up a revolver from the little octagonal table and spun its dulled chambers; then, pocketing the weapon, he seized his bull's-eye lantern and descended to the big "office" below. Opening the tiny window over the alley, he put out his head and waited, listening intently.

At ten minutes past the hour a tall, heavy man entered the Ziegelstraat at its western end. Experiencing a sense of security in the enshrouding darkness, he clattered boldly over the cobbles, totally unaware that he had company—a little man who, rubber-shod, kept soundless step for step with him.

The fog seemed to cause the tall man no hin-

drance; he found the turning into the narrow alley as by instinct and swung round into it without hesitation. The footsteps ceased. Three peculiar coughs broke the silence; there was an echo, as it were, in the fog above; then more quick footsteps—and again the alley settled down to its sombre silence.

The unsuspected "shadow" had lagged behind a little and stood motionless at the entrance to the alley. "Phoo!" he breathed, expelling the breath which had momentarily extended his rosy cheeks. "Gone to earth—has he, the fox! Now, we will dig him out."

The time had come when the active assistance of his professional brethren was necessary. Well, this had all been arranged for; if instructions and promises had been carried out, assistance should be waiting in the square little more than two hundred yards away. The little man beat a noiseless retreat along the Ziegelstraat. He, too, appeared to suffer no inconvenience from the fog; but then, his name was Henri Faverol! And there was hardly one city in Europe through which M. Faverol could not find his way blindfold.

Meanwhile, with even more excessive regard for precaution than usual, Van Langenberg had admitted his visitor.

"You are late, partner!" the Dutchman said angrily, after he had closed the secret door and satisfied himself as to the tall man's identity by flashing the lantern's rays upon his face.

"Bah! A few minutes, more or less. Keep your temper. Console yourself it is for the last time. Let us go upstairs. I have much to tell you."

"So much to tell me!" Van Langenberg sneered. "Well, it can wait. You go upstairs. I wait down here."

"You've been drinking, Langenberg. Don't be a fool."

"I say, I wait here. I have business—very big business—with a friend of yours. A fool, am I?" Van Langenberg went on, with increasing acrimony. "And a few minutes more or less make no difference, hey? You wait just a few more of those don't-matter minutes and see for yourself."

"What the deuce do you mean?" his partner demanded. "Is anything wrong? If so, speak so that I can understand you."

Something in his visitor's voice warned Van Langenberg that further trifling would be unwise.

"Very well," he replied, with a quick change of tone. "I speak plain. You cable to say you will arrive at ten. You come at 10.15. And I tell you

that at 10.30, my gentleman, the 'German traveller' is coming. Hey? You do not like that! Now, tell me—am I a fool to be angry because you are late?"

The tall man drew in a quick, deep breath. "Keep your deuced lantern off my face," he growled. "And drop your fooling, will you?" he added, as Van Langenberg chuckled maliciously. Then: "What are you going to do?"

"Do!" Van Langenberg retorted. "Do what you would be afraid to do, partner. *Peste*! go upstairs and drink my cognac, stuff your fingers in your ears, and by-and-by I will come up and hear all about your troubles. And we will then drink together to the pleasant journey to his father, the devil on two sticks, which my 'German traveller' will have begun. I have got something to tell you, too. It is about the necklace. It has been returned to me. But for the present you go upstairs, partner, and drink my cognac." He darkened the lantern with a snap, and moved towards the little window.

"Langenberg?"

"Hey! Not gone?"

"Will you drop your fooling! Listen, I tell you! I forbid you to fire off that old pistol of yours. You'll rouse all the night watchmen in the neigh-

bourhood. Remember our rules. At a pinch, I command—you obey."

There was a pause, broken by the Dutchman's unintelligible mutterings. "Very well," he said sullenly in a low voice. "I remember. What do you want? But whisper. The time is near, and I have the window open."

"Give me the lantern, and you go upstairs and wait. I will deal with your visitor."

"No. We will both wait. Hush! There is the signal!"

Van Langenberg put his head through the window and coughed three times very quietly. His partner came up behind him and took possession of the lantern. Van Langenberg offered no resistance. His attention was fully occupied. In the alley below some one had repeated the signal for a second time.

"Who?" the Dutchman called down softly into the fog.

"Ledgers—stationery," came the subdued reply.

"Feel along the right wall. Inside the door—turn to the right and come up. Be careful—and silent!" Van Langenberg withdrew his head and closed and curtained the window. "Now we spiflicate him!" he whispered jubilantly; then, seeing that his partner had opened the secret door,

he went on craftily: "But wait, partner. We must arrange plans. Let me go down. I am more used to it than you. I will not shoot. You stay here; and when he comes up, you——"

"Go upstairs, do you hear?" growled the other. He knew Van Langenberg; and, moreover, he suspected that the Dutchman was more than half-intoxicated and would be reckless enough—nay, he intended to shoot the "German traveller" on sight, promises or plans to the contrary notwithstanding.

"No! No! No!" Van Langenberg pleaded.

"Very well," rejoined his partner decisively, "you know me. If you don't obey, I shall warn him." The lantern's rays fell upon the door leading to the upper room, and remained there steadily. "Are you going?"—inflexibly.

Van Langenberg moved silently across the room.

"You will go to your own apartment—and stay there."

The Dutchman made no reply. He was too mortified for words. The bubble of his vanity had been pricked. Pretence and bluster apart, he had known all along that his grim partner "suffered" him—let him preen himself—be insolent, familiar, think himself an equal. But when it came to a pinch. . . . And it was in the

rules of their partnership. He, Van Langenberg, must obey. But he had set his very heart on crying quits with the "German traveller," who had beaten the firm of Van Langenberg at their own game.

Having gained his eyrie, the Dutchman extinguished the lamp; then he dropped on hands and knees by the door, and, risking apoplexy, craned his head down the stairs. Straining his ears to catch sounds from below, he failed to hear stealthy movements behind him. Suddenly a pair of hands gripped his throat; another pair of hands jerked him over upon his back; his limbs were pinioned; and as he opened his mouth in a vain attempt to sound the alarm a gag was thrust within his jaws. Choked almost to unconsciousness, he heard one of his assailants snigger evilly.

"Shut up, you fool," said another voice in a whisper. "The cord—quick!"

Then he was rolled over upon his side, his wrists were pressed behind, his ankles forced backwards to meet them, and he was left to lie, trussed like a fowl. His captors stood up and argued, their voices barely audible.

"We must go down and let him in," said one.

"No," rejoined the other who had demanded the cord. "Our orders are to wait up here."

"But we've got this fat pig."

"We don't know he's our man."

"Let's have a look at him."

"No lights on this job. Remember your orders, you fool! Andy will kill you if you get monkeying again. And be quiet! There may be another below."

"P'st! that's right enough.". . . The faintest ray of light seemed to flicker at the bottom of the stairs. . . . "Look!"

"Quiet!"

From below came a smothered cry; the flicker of light faded away suddenly into pitch darkness, and there was the dull sound as of a heavy body falling to the floor. Then the silence of the grave.

"He's got him!" the speaker gasped, as if the breath had been knocked out of him by a blow from his companion's elbow.

Presently a low, snake-like hiss rustled the stillness. The signal was answered, and the two men went quietly down the stairs to Van Langenberg's long "office."

"The rope," demanded the voice of André Gaspard out of the darkness.

"We've used it, guv'nor—already," Jean sniggered.

"I said the rope! Fetch it!" Gaspard replied,

in cool tones. His sense of touch had told him that the big, bearded man under him was not Van Langenberg; but this was not the time for explanations, and Gaspard guessed the meaning of Jean's words.

Jean darted back to the upper room. Outside the window, doubled round a short steel bar fixed securely in the roof, a rope was suspended. Jean pulled on the one part, and, coiling the rope in his hand, hastened back with it to his companions. Though they could not see an inch before their eyes, Polliter and Jean set to work with extraordinary celerity. A gag was quickly improvised; and soon, without a word having been spoken, the second member of the firm of Van Langenberg lay tightly bound, trussed as his partner had been.

Gaspard did not take part in the process. As soon as the gag had been inserted he released his grip and began searching about for the lantern which had been extinguished on falling to the floor. The last knot tied, Jean sat by the side of the captive and passed his long, flexible fingers over the man's face. Prompted by curiosity, or, it may be, by malice, he gave the beard a vicious tweak.

"Guv'nor!" Jean said suddenly. "This parishioner's beard's a fake."

"Very likely," Gaspard replied carelessly. He had found the lantern and, with his back turned, was engaged in manipulating the oil receptacle which had become misplaced in the fall. He struck a match and lighted the wick; then he swept the light around the room. The rays fell upon a lamp upon Van Langenberg's big desk.

"Light it," he said curtly.

As Polliter crossed to the desk to obey, Gaspard shone the "bull's-eye" upon the captive's face.

"Who is he, guv'nor?" Jean inquired.

Instantly Gaspard turned the lantern away. "Kit!" he said in a strange voice. "The lamp can wait." Then, to Jean: "He is not the 'little Dutchman.' Stay here, both of you," he added. "And, remember, no light until I return. I shall not be more than three minutes."

With this command Gaspard left them in the darkness, and went up to Van Langenberg's private apartment. His subordinates heard him choking, as if he were vainly trying to suppress uproarious merriment.

"Guv'nor seems to find it funny, don't he?" Jean remarked.

Polliter did not reply. He, too, was puzzled by his leader's behaviour; but he had never discussed him with Jean, and did not intend to begin

to do so now. Jean made some highly insulting observations on his comrade's reticence, and they relapsed into silence.

Gaspard kept his promise. Not more than three minutes elapsed before he returned, shutting both staircase doors behind him.

"Yes," he remarked, carefully abstaining from shining the lantern upon the captive, "yes, that is the 'little Dutchman' upstairs. But he is stubborn. We will attend to him later. You may light the lamp, Kit. Jean, take the 'bull's-eye' and go down the steps behind you. Be careful. One step is missing. Use your gifts to discover how the door into the alley works. But do not open it."

The job was one after Jean's own heart; he seized the lantern and, as Polliter struck a match and lighted the lamp, he disappeared round the secret cupboard door like a rat into a crevice.

Gaspard strode noiselessly to the cupboard and gently pushed it to. Hearing the click of the spring lock, Polliter turned round, saw what his leader had done, and realised its significance. Jean had been deliberately shut out. But why the ghoulish expression of mirth in Gaspard's face?

"What's up, Andy?" Polliter stammered, surprised for once into asking a question.

Gaspard broke out into a horrible laugh. "I promised little Jean three minutes," he croaked. "He has had them! Look!" he added, with a jeering shout of triumph, pointing to the man at his feet.

Polliter stared. Was Gaspard mad? For some time past he had feared so. Then an inkling of his leader's meaning flashed into his mind. Polliter sprang forward—stooped—peered. "By—!" he gasped. "Gautil!—Courtois! . . . Andy!" in a hoarse, awed whisper—"you're the devil!"

Who else could have contrived this climax?

Gaspard did not enlighten his subordinate that the *deus ex machina* was not himself, but, rather, fate—or, he would have said, his "luck." Probably, in his present state of mind, Gaspard hardly heard the doubtful compliment Polliter had paid him.

"Realise what it means, Kit?" Gaspard inquired mockingly. "Why he's here? Why he knows all the secrets of the 'little Dutchman's' private entrance? Once a 'crook,' always a 'crook,' Kit, eh? How about his 'collection,' eh? They are partners, Kit. Think of it! Think of it! And think of his 'collection'! Collection! And now we have 'collected' them both!" Again Gaspard broke out into horrible cachinnations.

Polliter understood quite enough. But, strangely, he found nothing but a growing terror in the situation. "What are you going to do with them?" he faltered, clenching and unclenching his fingers in a way that showed his nervous tension.

"Do with them!" jeered the other. "Bah! you are soft, comrade. Do with them? Why, what should we do? Silent, Kit? Well, I will tell you. We will bleed the 'little Dutchman.' But all in good time. First, we will show our kind old comrade here a few—just a few—of the playful little practical jokes we learnt from our friends on the charming island to which he sent us.

"Twenty years, Kit . . . Surely, we do not want Jean and his little knife yet, eh?" Gaspard added, after a slight pause. His voice had suddenly become restrained; but in it there was a hideous menace of cruelty to come.

The man at his feet seemed to quiver, then he lay quite still.

"Not yet—eh, friend Courtois?" Gaspard repeated, prodding him with a foot.

"Case-hardened" as his life had made him, an intense, overwhelming repulsion swept over Polliter. "Andy!" he managed to jerk out. "Andy!—not that! Remember what you said.

We—you and I—we were gentlemen once. We can't do it. Andy!"—the pleading came with a rush now. "Make him pay—beggar him. He won't split. He daren't. He can't. But I won't stand by and see—curse it! I can't!"

Like a flash Polliter whipped out a revolver. What he intended to do—to shoot his leader, or mercifully to give his old enemy quittance—will always remain unsolved; but one thing is certain. Polliter, usually so phlegmatic, so silent, so tractable, had rebelled at last; and, as is the way with men of his type, he was in deadly earnest and exceedingly "dangerous."

But even as Polliter levelled the weapon, he perceived that the quick, savage menace which had sprung into his leader's eyes had faded away, leaving Gaspard gazing dreamily into space. A sudden reaction broke Polliter's nerve. Almost furtively he slid the revolver back into his pocket. For the nonce, Courtois was completely forgotten.

"Andy!" Polliter faltered presently. "Andy! What is it? Rouse yourself!" He ventured to touch him, and even to shake the rigid form gently. But Gaspard remained immovable, lost to the world, the very breath of life, as it were, gone out of him.

With startling suddenness came the sound of

splintering glass; one of Van Langenberg's heavy ledgers fell to the floor; and Polliter, wheeling round, was just in time to see the blunt point of a steel tool being withdrawn through the back of the cupboard. Then a beseeching whisper reached his ears.

"Guv'nor!—guv'nor!—police!—look out for yourself, guv'nor!" The whisper went on unceasingly.

There was good reason for the warning. Finding himself trapped, Jean had run down the steps again and put the knowledge he had acquired to the test.

Opening the alley door, he ran into the Ziegelstraat. Just as he was about to apply his tools to force open the street door of Van Langenberg's office, his sharp ears caught the sound of footsteps.

Darting back into the alley, he waited; he heard whispered orders that left no doubt as to the identity of the newcomers. Escape for himself by way of the canal was easy; but, curiously enough, the idea never entered his bizarre mind.

Jean fled back to the secret stairway, conscious only of a wild desire to warn the grim leader and master who so often had treated him like a dog, had beaten him unmercifully.

Within the long "office," Jean's whispered

caution seemed to rouse Gaspard from his dream-like seizure and bring him smoothly back to realities. But it was not the Gaspard of two minutes ago who now spoke. Rather it was George Heron, or, perhaps, the elderly gentleman who, in Polliter's London chambers, had admitted that he was "changed"; that he was a human being again; that he hesitated for fear of "hurting others."

"Kit," he said in matter-of-fact tones, "look down into the alley, will you?"

Assured of his leader's return to sanity, Polliter gasped with relief. Then he ran to the little window and peered down. The fog had thinned a trifle, and through the murk he thought he saw the darker forms of men waiting in silence.

"Right enough," he announced gravely, turning from the window. "There are men down there."

"Go up and bargain with the 'little Dutchman' for his freedom," Gaspard commanded. "I will do the same for"—he hesitated—"Gautil. Be quick! We shall have them in on us soon."

Polliter rushed up the stairs. Gaspard's use of the name Gautil had allayed a recurrence of his misgivings.

Gaspard began dexterously to cut free the rope binding the man at his feet. "Friend Courtois,"

he said, "you also are in a fix. The police—you understand. But for the sake of others, I am giving you a chance of escape. You will pay for it—I will see to that. But, now"—he rolled Courtois over upon his back and plucked out the gag—"tell me: how does one open the cupboard behind you?"

But a long glance told him that his question would never be answered. Hippolyte Courtois was dead!

Gaspard rose and shrugged his shoulders. Without haste he crossed to the cupboard, and, flinging out Van Langenberg's ledgers, he struck the back with his fist. Jean's agitated whisper ceased.

"Jean!" Gaspard said distinctly. "Can you hear? . . . Very well. Listen! I have kept my promise to you. You have had your three minutes with a friend, Courtois, here in this room. But, comrade, he has gone to join Captain Black; therefore you must not complain. It is a just retribution for broken orders. So, little Jean, it is 'good-bye.' I thank you for your warning, and I will prove my gratitude. Go down to the alley door; wait until you hear me knock; then save yourself."

Gaspard strode to the window and jerked it

open. "Hi!" he shouted in Dutch. "Round to Dopplander's warehouse! Quick! They have escaped over the roof!"

A rush of feet below followed his stratagem, and, smiling grimly, Gaspard sprang to the cupboard and thundered upon the back of it with a heavy ledger.

At the moment Polliter came flying down the stairs, one hand gripping a heavy necklace of pearls, the other his revolver. "Explained terms," he jerked out in a staccato whisper—"ungagged him—told me to look in wine-case under bed—found this—recognise it?—worth a fortune—went to free him—dead!"

"Alcoholic apoplexy," Gaspard replied coolly, taking the ropes of pearls from Polliter's grasp and gazing at them indifferently. "Yes, they're worth a fortune; but if the 'little Dutchman' couldn't get rid of them we cannot now. A trick, I expect. But what are our friends the police waiting for?"

A loud hammering upon the door leading down to the clerk's office answered his question, and a crisp voice was heard demanding admittance in the name of all that stood for the authority of the law.

Polliter began to twitch with impatient excite-

ment. "Roof's no good," he whispered. "Jean pulled in the rope for him"—jerking his head in the direction of Courtois's still body.

"Keep cool," Gaspard said, with exasperating slowness. "The 'little Dutchman' was an authority on doors. That is why you and Jean had to get in by the window."

"But, Andy! How are we to get out?"

Gaspard pointed in silence to the far end of the long "office." A glance at Van Langenberg's crane, with the rope ready rove in the sheave, robbed Polliter of his nervous anxiety. At this fresh proof of his leader's resource his own coolness in an emergency came back to him. He grinned admiringly.

"What about Courtois?" he inquired.

"Stubborn," Gaspard replied. "Let him lie." Then he laughed contemptuously, and, taking a quick step towards the staircase, he flung the necklace up into Van Langenberg's eyrie. "Let him keep it," he said. "Come on, Kit. Our friends outside are getting impatient."

The necessity for haste, at last, had become apparent even to Gaspard, for the door was quivering, and his experienced eye told him that a powerful jemmy was at work.

They ran to the recessed window. The trap-

door was quickly found and lifted; the crane was swung out and the coil of rope dropped through the aperture.

"You first," Gaspard said, pushing the rope towards his companion.

Polliter wavered. A lifetime's allegiance swayed him. He took a quick step backwards. "No!" he growled doggedly. "I don't forget your 'All or none.' You first, Andy, this time."

"Foolish—but like you!" laughed his leader. "Kit, you are soft—but you are a gentleman. New Caledonia cannot rob us of all, eh? Well—if you insist—it is 'good-bye' at last, comrade." He grasped the two parts of the rope. "Better put the light out, Kit," he advised. Then he slid out of sight.

Polliter turned to run across the room to the lamp; but at the same instant there was a sharp crack, the door burst open, and a rosy-cheeked little man bounced lightly into the "office." One quick stare was enough.

"'Jacobs'!" Faverol shouted, in exultant astonishment. Even now he could not resist his love for a little pleasantry. But a hand whipped into his coat pocket.

"Mister Faver!" Polliter retorted, with a bitter laugh—fired at him—and missed.

Almost simultaneously the aperture of Faverol's coat pocket bulged open. A second loud report. Polliter dropped his weapon, stared stupidly, then crumpled to the floor.

But André Gaspard had escaped, unseen; his presence even, unsuspected: "Invisible" to the very last.

CHAPTER XVII

FAVEROL LEARNS THE "BIG LESSON"

IT is curious how, in the long run, luck almost invariably ranges itself on the side of the forces which society—that is to say, the herd—maintains to protect itself against the egregious.

Kit Polliter was a criminal, and, therefore, egregious; and it has already been shown how luck, and nothing but luck, enabled M. Henri Faverol to call him to a final, worldly account. As will be seen later, the same abstract power figured largely in the case of Jean, "the Rat."

At the time of the disappearance of André Gaspard and his two comrades a native insurrection was harassing the authorities in New Caledonia to such an extent that they were only too pleased to accept circumstantial evidence, and, as it were, to wipe the "Invisibles" completely off their books.

Shortly afterwards, it happened that a punitive force, ranging the country between Mount Kopeto

and Muèo Bay, had occasion to pay an official call upon a cannibal village hidden away in a nullah. Being unprepared to receive their visitors, the natives fled hastily.

The punitive force was aggrieved; but they were somewhat consoled by discovering in a dwelling which, judging from the grisly relics festooning the entrance, had once harboured a most unsavoury "wizard," certain Government property—to wit, garments which, beyond doubt, had formerly adorned the bodies of the three missing convicts.

The inference seemed obvious; though subsequently, when several of the fleeing villagers had been captured and arraigned upon the capital charge, their headman, through the mouth of an interpreter, emphatically denied that murder had been done, or that his people's peculiar tastes had been gratified.

He explained with much detail that the former occupiers of the garments in question had fled across the "big water," and he offered to lead his captors to the mouth of a little river, whence, he asseverated, the three white men had taken their departure.

The headman, however, merely gained the credit of being, for a nigger, a most resourceful liar, and he was promptly shot. No doubt his decease was

advisable, as a warning to others brought up in the cannibalistic ritual.

In the excitement of the campaign the incident was temporarily forgotten; but when the insurrection had been quelled and the punitive force had returned to Noumea, it learned that a garrulous South Sea skipper had recently brought from Sydney well-thumbed newspapers containing full details of the mysterious disappearance of "Near-enough Black," and of the finding of that unfortunate captain's schooner, *Coal Sack*, upon the high seas, and, in addition, many theories which might account for the extraordinary story narrated by her short-lived Kanaka survivor.

The defunct headman's assertions were at once recalled; and, in view of the corroborative evidence of the Sydney journalistic "scoop," it appeared highly probable that André Gaspard, Kit Polliter, and that execrable fount of trouble, Jean "the Rat," had, after all, made good their escape from the island.

Outwardly, authority in Noumea shrugged its shoulders and paid no heed to the matter; nevertheless, before many months passed, the police of the civilised world became acquainted with the ominous fact that three especial undesirables had unceremoniously taken their leave from the French

penal settlement in New Caledonia, and once again were gentlemen at large.

In particular, a certain weary-eyed chief of secret police in Paris had at his disposal all the information concerning the escape of the erstwhile notorious gang, formerly known as the "Invisibles," that authority in Noumea had been able to collect. And a search into the police records of twenty years ago for additional information relative to the gang did not serve to soothe the mind of the already overworked chief.

As some sort of set-off to this additional source of anxiety, ten days after the information from New Caledonia reached him, the chief received a report from the absent M. Henri Faverol which made him unusually jubilant, but, at the same time, not a little exasperated; for Faverol's report was brief in the extreme, and it lacked just those details which the expectant chief particularly desired.

He telegraphed at once to Faverol, urgently demanding his presence in Paris immediately the police inquiry into the Ziegelstraat affair then taking place in Rotterdam could dispense with his services as chief witness. Faverol, for his part, was glad of the delay; he deemed it in every way more prudent to make a full report in person;

and he wanted time to work out a plausible explanation of the "little irregularities" of which he had been guilty in following up his "private case."

The little police agent had concealed his knowledge that the unknown man whom he had shot in self-defence was Kit Polliter, one of the "Invisibles," allowing the Dutch police to hold such theories as they thought fit. And it may be said that, so far, the general public, as apart from the police, knew little of the whole affair, except that the famous Polignac necklace of pearls stolen from the Duchess of Belward had at last been recovered.

In due time Faverol was released from his official duties in Rotterdam. He hastened at once to Paris and presented himself before his chief. Faverol was in an extraordinarily chastened mood.

Although he felt convinced that Sebastien Gautil (alias Hippolyte Courtois) and Van Langenberg were the mysterious rogues he had been commissioned to trace, he was almost lachrymose over the climax in the Ziegelstraat which had robbed him of complete success in the "double event," for he knew that in all probability such clever rascals as André Gaspard and Jean would take warning by their comrade's death, and, true

to their old name, "Invisibles," they would fade away into thin air.

Had it not been for his characteristic vanity and the insatiable desire to clutch at every bit of kudos that could be gained from the affair, Faverol would have been tempted to conceal his "private case," altogether. But the two cases were inextricably mixed up, and he was mortified to find that even his astute brains could not extract from the tangle a story which he could be sure would satisfy his equally astute chief.

Full and open confession, with detail from start to finish, seemed to be the only way out of the difficulty. But Faverol detested the idea of open confession, for he could not claim that unqualified success which alone, in the service of which he was a member, would justify his "little irregularities" and, perhaps, allow them to be overlooked.

Yes, there was no doubt of it; M. Henri Faverol was unhappy; and he wore an unusually subdued air when he entered the lofty, drab, sparsely furnished chamber which served his grim chief as an office.

The chief, on the contrary, appeared to be in a particularly gracious mood. He greeted Faverol's appearance with unqualified enthusiasm, again condescended to shake hands, and offered the

little police agent warm congratulations upon his safe return.

Faverol began to reply in what he considered to be suitable terms, but with a smile his chief cut short the flowery periods.

"Let us dispense with compliments for the present, M. Faverol," he said eagerly. "Your very brief report has roused my curiosity to a degree which the scanty details I have been able to gather, with regard to the inquiry that has kept you in Rotterdam, have not in any way lessened. Tell me—in a word—have you been successful?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Excellent!" The chief rubbed his hands gleefully. "I knew I was right to place confidence in your powers. Excellent! But sit down, M. Faverol—sit down. You look tired."

Faverol attempted one of his graceful, grateful little bows, and considering that it might be useful to play the part of a worn-out man, he sighed with very creditable weariness as he sank into the chair indicated. "But proof is difficult, Monsieur. Time alone will show," he said, qualifying his last assertion.

His chief nodded. "Quite so—quite so," he agreed. "But when I learned that the Polignac necklace had been discovered in Van Langenberg's

possession, I myself found proof enough. What astounds me is the crass blindness of the Dutch police all these years," he added with heat.

At another time Faverol would have seized the opportunity of applying a little "butter"—just a neat comparison between the Dutch and the French heads of police; but, somehow, the compliment would not come, and he found himself saying: "Yes, Monsieur. Especially after poor Manton's death. He was taken from the canal not two hundred yards from Van Langenberg's warehouse."

"Of course—of course," his chief agreed. "There is not a shred of doubt in my mind that Manton ran this Van Langenberg to ground, and was shot by him, or by one of his two confederates."

One of his two confederates! Faverol moved uneasily in his chair. "There can be no doubt in any one's mind," he said. "The bullet which was extracted from Manton's body was produced at the inquiry; and it fitted exactly the revolver found in Van Langenberg's pocket.

"More proof—more proof," cried his chief delightedly. "This is indeed excellent. But before we go into detail, who were Van Langenberg's confederates? Do we know them? This Sebas-

tien Gautil—an alias, of course—and the man you shot: who were they? There is barely a word about them here." With some irritability he tapped a bundle of papers lying upon his desk in front of him.

Faverol felt that he was being hustled. His chief's eagerness was embarrassing. He had intended to lead up to this part of his problem in his own particular fashion. "Monsieur," he began, "Sebastien Gautil was Arthur Allerton, the well-known moneylender in London," he hesitated, obviously.

His chief uttered an exclamation of astonishment. "Go on," he said sharply. "What the deuce are you waiting for?"

In spite of his hesitation, Faverol's characteristic love of a "situation" began to assert itself. After all, he thought, it would be rather amusing to watch the increasing mystification which would presently appear in his chief's face.

"Twenty years ago, Monsieur," Faverol went on with deliberate slowness, "this Sebastien Gautil was known in Paris as Hippolyte Courtois, the man who gained a police reward for betraying a gang of notorious criminals called the 'Invisibles.' The man I shot dead in Rotterdam was Kit Polliter, one of—" He stopped. His chief had

sprung to his feet. Mystification was amply in evidence, but, somehow, it was not of the exact quality Faverol had expected or desired.

"The 'Invisibles'! Kit Polliter!" the chief almost shouted. "What do you know about the 'Invisibles'?"

"Perhaps, Monsieur," Faverol suggested, a trifle uneasily, "it would be better if I explained everything in my own way."

His chief frowned, then he laughed shortly and sat down again. "You are either a wizard or, as M. Lavigne says, the luckiest man in the service," he remarked, stretching an arm across the desk and pulling another bundle of papers towards him. "Go on—go on."

It was Faverol's turn now to be mystified. But as his chief's words and manner seemed propitious, he took his courage in both hands and began his tale. Faverol left out nothing—from the morning when old Louis sidled into his room with information for sale, until the conclusion of the recent police inquiry in Rotterdam.

His chief did not once interrupt; but, as the narrative proceeded, the droop of weary-looking eyes—eloquent evidence of overwork and ceaseless mental strain—grew more pronounced, as if the consciousness of the futility of his never-

ending labours was slowly wearing down his powers.

Every trace of its previous graciousness towards his subordinate vanished from his face and left it wooden; but when Faverol had finished, the square jaw was thrust forward a little more than usual, and the grey eyes, relentless for all the drooping of the lids, glittered in a way that made the peccant little police agent feel desperately uncomfortable.

"You realised at Beaudelay that you might have to make a choice—to follow this Gautil—or George Heron," the chief said slowly. "And yet, even then, you did not communicate with me—or, as I could have understood, with Scotland Yard. Why?"

"Monsieur," Faverol faltered, "I had but suspicions to go on. We could not have arrested any of them." It was a feeble excuse, absolutely unworthy of Faverol; and as soon as he had made it, Faverol cursed himself bitterly for being a jackass. But worse was to follow.

Because it suited him, the chief took the excuse literally. "Could we not?" he retorted grimly. He detached a paper from the packet in front of him and handed it to Faverol. "I quite understand a clever man's ambition," he went on with

biting scorn; "but read that. It came while you were at Beaudelay. Nothing could have been more opportune. Now, all its worth consists in the fact that it shows what a grasping, self-opinionated, undisciplined imbecile M. Faverol has made himself appear."

With the paper quivering in his trembling hands, Faverol rose slowly to his feet. He could hardly believe his ears. Never before had such words been addressed to him.

"Monsieur!" he began in indignant protest. His chief cut him short.

"Silence!" he commanded in a voice that brooked no reply. "Read it!"

Faverol saluted, and bent his head over the paper. The rosy flush on his cheeks deepened into carmine; but, as he read on, his face grew ashy pale. For the document set forth all the information concerning the escape of the "Invisibles" from New Caledonia which authority in Noumea had been able to collect.

Faverol was undergoing the big lesson which comes to every man at least once in a lifetime. He took it hardly. His emotional Gallic temperament overwhelmed him; he let the paper flutter down upon the carpet, covered his face with his hands, and wept.

The chief stooped and picked up the paper, and, with meticulous attention to neatness, replaced it in the packet. "Yes," he said, half to himself and half to give point to Faverol's lesson, "this justified a warrant for instant arrest, or at least the employment of extra assistance. If you had not been so grasping—if you had been more frank with me, there is no doubt we could have recaptured the three of them.

"As it is—Polliter, the least important, if the records are to be believed, is dead. The others"—he spread out his hands with an expressive gesture. "And your story has another bearing," he went on. "This Sebastien Gautil—this—er—Arthur Allerton: did anything transpire to his detriment at the inquiry? Leave off crying, and answer me."

Faverol exhibited a pink, tear-stained countenance. "No, Monsieur," he said brokenly. "They could find out nothing."

"And they won't," his chief snapped. "You will see; his money-lending business will prove absolutely aboveboard, and the income from it ample to account for his domestic expenses. If he was Van Langenberg's partner, he kept the two businesses separate; and some bank will have a big deposit which will never be claimed. But I believe

he had nothing to do with Van Langenberg," he added thoughtfully.

"Monsieur!" Faverol cried, his woe-begone expression changing to one of intense astonishment.

"I believe," his chief went on doggedly, "that the 'Invisibles' discovered in some extraordinary way that Van Langenberg was a 'fence,' and they used him in his capacity of shipper of wines to lure their old enemy to Rotterdam for the purpose of taking revenge. I believe Gautil was 'straight'!"

"But, Monsieur—the burglary at Seckley Cottage: the three pictures!—his mode of life!"

"His mode of life—very natural. Events have proved that he had every reason to be secretive. He feared his old enemies would escape, and he did not want every one to know he was a money-lender. The burglary, the three pictures. Bah! Myths, M. Faverol. Myths!"

"Monsieur! let me redeem my character. Send me to England. I will prove they were not myths."

"You, M. Faverol! No. I shall entrust M. Lavigne with that. And then, only if an inquiry into Arthur Allerton's business seems to demand it. I see no reason in bringing unnecessary misery into the lives of those two much-to-be-pitied ladies at

Seckley Cottage. But let that pass. I have a simple, easy commission for you, M. Faverol. Among the numerous mistakes you have made recently, one stands out exceptionally clearly. You remember the case of the Bêche Noire which you managed?"

Faverol winced; but he answered humbly, "Yes, Monsieur."

"Louis, of course, was burned."

"Yes, Monsieur—and I wish to Heaven it had happened sooner," Faverol broke out suddenly.

The chief smiled sourly. "Well," he said, "M. Lavigne sent me a report this morning, in which he says that, having occasion to pass through Marleon-sur-Seine yesterday, he thought he recognised Louis, alive—in the flesh. If that is the case, the story which the porter of Bêche Noire told is probably true, and he is innocent of the arson. Therefore, for the present, M. Faverol, I think I can wish you good day. Go and see what you can make of this little problem."

To some men a drastic reprimand does a world of good; and, no doubt, the experienced chief bore this in mind when dealing with M. Faverol. As a matter of fact, he had long desired a legitimate opportunity of administering a severe "take-down" to the little man, for the chief had always

been irritated by Faverol's finicking finesse and unbounded self-assurance.

Without a word, Faverol clicked his heels together, saluted like an ordinary police constable, and departed to conduct the kind of "case" usually entrusted to the veriest novice.

He found old Louis—now George Martel, an innkeeper—without much difficulty; Marleon-sur-Seine being but a tiny village. But rendered cautious and diffident by his recent tribulations, Faverol did not at once make himself known.

Instead, he enlisted the assistance of the village gendarme, who happened to be a large and very active man. They approached the inn just as Louis was closing for the night.

The old fellow had his fill of late hours at the Bêche Noire, and he had formed a habit of retiring to his virtuous slumbers at the earliest opportune moment. From a place of concealment the two police officers watched him put up the shutters on one window, and then go indoors through the porch to obtain those for the second.

At that moment an undersized little man slunk round the corner of the inn, glanced hastily around, and darted into the porch after Louis.

A muffled scream of terror broke the stillness of

the night; and the light streaming from the inn door went out. Faverol made a dash for the porch, only to trip headlong over a lithe body, which seemed to fling itself from nowhere against his ankles.

The big gendarme, following a couple of yards behind, recognised the well-known trick, and before the man who had tripped up Faverol could rise, he hurled himself upon him, and literally smothered him in a vast embrace.

Faverol had fallen light. Like an india-rubber ball, he sprang up and swung round to the gendarme's assistance. There was a click of manacles, and in a moment a helpless, writhing, snarling little prisoner was dragged by the heels into the lobby of the inn.

Groans greeted their entrance. Bidding the gendarme keep close guard over the captive, Faverol struck a match and lighted a lamp which he espied upon a big round table. Then, guided by the groans, he searched for Louis.

He discovered him upon the stone-flagged floor of a passage leading to the back premises. With the lamp aloft, Faverol gazed down at him. A glance showed that Louis had been stabbed in the breast and was dying. But the old fellow was quite conscious, and he looked up at Faverol with

a sardonic grin of recognition. His eyes blinked furiously.

"Too late, 'Favvy,'" he gasped out jeeringly. . . . "But, hold on . . . little devil . . . he's . . . Jean . . . 'the Rat'. . . ." Louis choked for breath—his indomitable old eyes blinked once more—then gazed fixedly into eternity.

CHAPTER XVIII

ANDRÉ GASPARD REPAYS A DEBT

FAVEROL straightened himself, and went swiftly back to the prisoner. Holding the lamp aloft, he stared hard at the cruel, ratlike face.

"Know him?" inquired the gendarme laconically.

Know him! Yes, Faverol knew him. But he made no reply.

Inwardly the little police agent was telling himself that Lavigne was right. He, Henri Faverol, was, indeed, the luckiest man in the service. Evidently Faverol had learned his lesson. Barely twenty-four hours ago he would have died before acknowledging that the decrepit old fossil, Lavigne, could be right in anything; and, certainly, the little police agent would have paid no tribute to luck.

Nevertheless, when he thought of his schoolmaster, the chief of secret police, the ghost of a jaunty smile wrinkled Faverol's rosy cheeks.

Mrs. Aubertin opened her eyes and gazed dreamily at a shaft of sunlight which had found its way past the edge of the heavy window curtains into the darkened room. Of late the morning awakening had brought her nothing but a feeling of weariness and physical discomfort; and she had been only too thankful if uneasy sleep had returned to her to dull the morbid fancies of her brain, until Mrs. Pountney's knock and cheery voice announced that she and the breakfast tray demanded admittance.

But to-day Mrs. Aubertin felt unusually—delightfully—refreshed. She stretched her limbs healthily and sat up in bed. The thin shaft of sunlight made the dim room seem oppressive; and giving way to a sudden craving, she flung off the bedclothes. Donning a warm dressing-gown, she pulled aside the curtains, drew up the blind, and leaning well out of the low window, she filled her lungs with the delicious freshness of the morning air.

Beyond the orchard she could discern a dead-white, "silent" mist flooding the river valley; but here, upon the heights, the glistening countryside was bathed in the joyous light of a bright, frosty sun. Beneath the window in the old-fashioned farmhouse garden Mrs. Pountney, a grey

shawl over her faded print bodice, her cheeks in the crisp air more like twin russet apples than ever, was gathering her matutinal bunch of late flowers, some intended for the "parlour" and others to make her lodger's breakfast tray appear more inviting.

An old "fitcher"-coloured cat followed her along the platted paths, rubbing its arched back against its mistress's skirts, and occasionally, when thrust away by an impatient foot, evincing a kittenish friskiness ludicrously out of keeping with its disreputable appearance.

Presently Mrs. Pountney glanced up and saw her lodger at the window. "Well, I never!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Aubertin smiled at the almost comical expression of surprise in the old woman's face and attitude. "Good morning, Mrs. Pountney," she said. "I felt so wide awake, I really could not stay in bed another moment. Isn't the air delicious?"

"Yes, it's a rare mornin'. And, m'dear, I'm glad to see you lookin' so fresh and bonny yourself. Bless me! but we'll soon be putting some colour into your cheeks if you'll go on gettin' up to greet the sun—as they say. Joe!" she called out suddenly. "If you've done your breakfast come out here!"

From the stone-flagged kitchen below came the sound of a chair being pushed back, and in a few moments Farmer Pountney lumbered out into the sunlight.

"Hist! missus," he said in reproof, "you'll wake up the lady—why! who were you talkin' to?" he added, his perplexed glance roving round the garden, and finally settling upon the cat.

His dame laughed merrily. "Where are your manners?" she retorted, giving him a warning push and pointing up at the window. "Look up and say 'Good mornin'.'"

The farmer raised his eyes, and his rubicund face, while exhibiting traces of a most engaging shyness, lit up with pleasure, until it seemed as bright as the sun itself. He gave vent to the same surprised remark as his wife had made. "Well, I never!" he exclaimed. "But I'm glad to see ye. The top of the mornin' to ye, marm."

Mrs. Aubertin's eyes grew a little moist as she replied to his greeting. The simple, whole-hearted interest displayed by the old couple in her unusual early rising touched her, and added to the gratitude she felt for their never-failing kindness and tactful sympathy. And, somehow, the sight of their wholesome, conscience-free faces smiling up at her made the poor lady feel a trifle less lonely.

"What lovely flowers!" she said, anxious to divert their attention from herself. "The very sight of them makes me want to bury my face in them; they look so sweet and refreshing."

"Do they, m'dear?" returned the practical Mrs. Pountney at once. "Then I'll bring the bunch up straight away with your can of hot water." She walked up the path towards the house.

The farmer followed her closely, and Mrs. Aubertin guessed from his behaviour that he was meditating some mischief. Perhaps, like the old cat, who had disappeared into the kitchen upon thieving intent, the crispness of the morning or the jollity of the occasion had got into his blood and banished the years. Whatever the cause, as they passed beneath Mrs. Aubertin's window, the old man grasped his dame by the middle and hoisted her high above his head.

"Don't wait for the hot water, marm," he cried out. "Take the posy now." And in spite of her struggles, he held his wife aloft until she had handed the flowers to Mrs. Aubertin, who reached down to grasp them. Then the farmer lowered his burden and fled like a schoolboy, with hunched shoulders.

"Well, I never!" gasped his indignant spouse. She raised her flushed cheeks to the window for

sympathy in her discomfiture; but, finding in the invalid's wistful face that unmistakable, piteous longing to laugh really heartily for once, she choked down her wrath, which, indeed, was not a little assumed, for she was vastly proud of her husband's strength.

"But he does startle a body so with his tricks," she said, as if in excuse for her momentary crossness. "But that's Joe all over, and he don't know his own strength. He always was up to some trick or other, ever since him and me started walkin' out together. I was but a snippet in them days, and now I'm twelve stun if I'm an ounce.

"Now, m'dear," she added authoritatively, "you pop your head in. You'll be catchin' cold else. You ain't used to fresh air on an empty stomach. I'll bring your water up straight away, and I'll have your breakfast ready as soon as ever you're ready for it."

With that Mrs. Pountney disappeared indoors, whence loud shoo-ings and other telltale sounds, followed by a glimpse of the fitcher-coloured cat as it streaked across the garden, told Mrs. Aubertin that if a biped had for the moment escaped punishment, a four-footed delinquent, at all events, had received just reward for its plaguy ways.

It was the first time for many weeks that Mrs.

Aubertin had come downstairs for breakfast, and somewhat to her surprise, she felt distinctly brighter and better physically for the novelty. But she found the extra time put at her disposal by her early rising likely to prove a little tedious, and she soon began to long for the appearance of Mrs. Gautil, who had sent a message overnight intimating that she would call for her friend about eleven o'clock to take her for a drive. The two ladies had seen very little of each other for some considerable time past, for Mrs. Gautil had been (mercifully, as it proved) fully occupied with the thousand and one details of business which her husband's death and burial had thrust upon her.

After clearing away the breakfast things Mrs. Pountney's keen eyes detected the much-dreaded signs of "moping." She made no remark, but twenty minutes later she reappeard in the parlour carrying Mrs. Aubertin's outdoor wraps.

"M'dear," the old woman said, "God A'mighty sends us all the flimsy-whimsies at times; but never a better doctor did He send than His blessed sunshine to cure 'em. And this room wants cleanin' and dustin' summat terrible," she added naïvely. "The wind this last week's sent a mort o' dust all over the place. So, m'dear, you put these on, while I go and fetch your boots."

Seeing that there was no help for it, Mrs. Aubertin acquiesced in the kindly expulsion from the house. She wandered somewhat aimlessly along the farm approach into the high road; but, coming to a part where the tall hedges cast long, chilly shadows, she turned to the left down a lane running between high red sandstone banks towards the larch coppice. Here she promenaded up and down, basking in the sun's genial warmth.

As she approached the coppice for the third time, a man emerged from among the trees, and, leaning upon the iron hurdles separating the coppice from the lane, stared at her intently. The stranger's face was clean-shaven, and he wore large gold-rimmed spectacles. His garb and a japanned-tin case suspended by a yellow strap to his shoulders suggested the geologist, or, perhaps, the moss-specimen enthusiast.

But Mrs. Aubertin knew him. At the very moment of his appearance she had been thinking of him, hoping and praying that he, the man whom once (was it ages ago?) she had loved almost to the point of madness, the man who had been the cause of all her distress of mind and body, who she more than half-suspected, was concerned in the death of her friend's husband—yes, she had been hoping and praying that he had gone out of her life for ever.

He vaulted the hurdles and strode swiftly towards her, his dark, burning eyes, from which he had snatched the spectacles, gazing fixedly at her in a way that, because she could not misunderstand it, made her shudder.

"Ninette!" he burst out ardently.

She raised her hands as if to ward him off. "Oh, why have you come?" she gasped, knowing all the while what his answer would be.

"You ask me that!" he replied in a low, impassioned voice. "My Heaven!" he cried hoarsely. "Why have I come! Because I am no longer a clod—a brute beast—an insane fool. . . . Because my heart is alive, alive!—when I thought it had died within me. . . . Because I love you—I burn, with the tortured cravings of twenty years, to clasp you in my arms again—to kiss you—to be kissed. . . . Ah, why do you shrink from me?"

He took a step forward, stretching out his arms with a gesture of ineffable tenderness and entreaty.

"Ninette!" he whispered; then his arms dropped to his sides, his eyes glazed, and he became rigid. It seemed as if the expression in her deathly white face had robbed him of life.

She struggled to speak, but could not. Strangely, she had no fear. She hardly saw him, for there had come to her a vision of a lamp-lit room which

vibrated with the last low note of a man's voice—and a single chord of haunting, torturing sadness. . . . Ah, too late! . . . Then, the sadness had been all hers; now, perhaps, it would be all his—even so long as he lived. He had come too late. A just retribution? Ay—it may be. But, woman-like, she found it in her heart to pity him.

Yet, in spite of her pity, her heart throbbed with relief and gladness. But how could she tell him—how explain, and make him accept the fact that now she, in turn, had lost utterly the power to love him? . . . that all she desired was that she might never see him again . . . might be allowed, mercifully, to forget him.

Suddenly Gaspard's rigid attitude relaxed. His eyes brightened. He seemed alive again. He glanced around him, keen and alert, his whole aspect changed almost beyond belief.

"I have come to say good-bye," he said, in the masterful tone which she remembered so well.

Ninette stared at him with uncomprehending amazement.

"It is better so," he added shortly. "You must understand that."

"Yes," she murmured dully, "it is better so. I understand that." She thought she was beginning to understand.

"Not '*au revoir*,'" he said presently. "It is 'good-bye'—for ever."

Tears welled up in her eyes. "André!" she faltered, "if you . . . will you—oh! Kiss me once—before you go."

He raised his cap, leaned forward and kissed her upon the forehead. Then he raised his cap again, bowed, and strode swiftly towards the coppice.

Through tear-dimmed eyes Ninette watched his sturdy figure disappear among the trees. Not once did he glance back. It was, indeed, "good-bye." Something told her, beyond all doubt, that André Gaspard had gone out of her life for ever!

Was it so? A physician, a brain specialist, might have said that time alone would prove her right or wrong. Let us leave the answer to Time; and let us leave to a grateful woman not that hate which she had begun to feel would be hers, but some kindly thoughts for the man who, by saying "good-bye" to her thus in the sun-bathed country lane, had perhaps repaid her a thousand times over the debt which he had once said with distressing callousness he could never repay.

Long after Gaspard had gone, Mrs. Aubertin stood quite still, gazing at the coppice with unseeing eyes. She felt dazed; her thoughts refused

to concentrate themselves. Yet she wanted to think—she must think. Mechanically she looked round at the bank, seeking for a place to sit upon.

A few yards away the red sandstone had been worn into a succession of steps by the feet of children climbing up to gather the blackberries which but a short while ago had ripened in the hedge crowning the bank. With a sigh she seated herself upon the lowest ledge; and the minutes passed by unheeded.

She was aroused from her abstraction by the sound of horses' hoofs, and, turning her head round, she caught a glimpse of the Gautil equipage as it drove past the top of the lane towards Penny Farm.

Ninette rose, glanced once, instinctively, at the coppice; then she gave herself a queer little indescribable shake, and walked briskly up the lane towards the high road. Already some colour had come into her cheeks, her limbs were steady and her eyes bright. It seemed to her that the numbing burden which had been surely crushing both mind and body had at last been lifted. It should remain for ever buried in the dark coppice at the end of that sun-bathed country lane. She would forget the past and strive to extract from

the future some of the arrears of happiness which were owing to her.

The victoria was waiting in the road by the farm gate. Hatt's stolid face relaxed into a kindly smile of welcome as Mrs. Aubertin approached. He touched his forehead with that military precision which he reserved for those who found favour in his eyes, and informed Mrs. Aubertin that his mistress had gone in search of her to the farm, but—with a flourish of his whip in the direction of the house—that she was "just coming along." Ninette passed through the gate and went to meet her.

Mrs. Gautil made a pathetic little picture in her widow's weeds. But she carried herself bravely, and, save that she appeared a little more frail, she exhibited no signs of the shock which her husband's death had caused her.

Trevor Wyer had been a tower of strength. He it was who had gone to Rotterdam and brought the body of Sebastien Gautil to its final resting-place in the tiny churchyard of Ardley. He it was who had laboured, and laboured successfully, to shield the widow from the misery which would have overwhelmed her had the police suspicions of her dead husband's rectitude been allowed to reach her ears.

And, perhaps, a pitying Almighty, realising in His omniscience that all could not have been evil in the heart of a man who had kept a wife's love throughout the dark years of their married life—perhaps He looked down upon the frail little widow and granted her an especial solace in her great grief.

"How well you look!" Mrs. Gautil greeted her friend. Mrs. Aubertin smiled happily. Then, without replying, she stooped a little and kissed the elder lady upon both cheeks. They had kissed often since the acquaintanceship between them had ripened into intimacy; but Mrs. Gautil flushed with pleasure at the unmistakable depth of affection underlying the embrace.

"My dear," she said with a pathetic little sigh, "when Celeste leaves me, I shall be a lonely old woman. If only you would change your mind and come and live with me then! Ah, that sounds selfish, but——"

"I understand," Ninette interrupted her, smiling mistily. "I, too, am lonely. I will come. And we will try to make each other happy."

"God willing," Mrs. Gautil replied reverently.

. . . . . .

Just as the sun gained the final mastery over the morning mist a fisherman in wading-trousers

and heavy brogues, with a rod flicking over his shoulder, came tramping up the river bank to Folley Ford.

For a while he stood pensively watching the "dimples" made by a school of grayling rising at the flies floating down the long gravel ripple at the head of the ford. Then he waded in to the middle of the river and began casting his line. Half an hour passed; in turn, every likely fly in his old fly-book was offered—and in vain. The creel upon the fisherman's back was empty. He reeled in his line and looked around him, almost furtively. Then his hand went to a pocket; a small flat tin box was produced; and, from among the bran and its wriggling companions, a white maggot was extracted.

With an "Ugh!" expressive of his disgust, the fisherman impaled the grub upon his fly. Then he stirred up the gravel with his brogues and let his bait float down the ripple towards the fastidious grayling.

In less than half an hour he had caught ten fish, and so engrossed was he in his sport that he failed to become aware of the dainty figure of a tall girl, dressed in black, who had come down the bank behind him and was watching him in amusement. Trevor Wyer hooked another fish, played it for half

a minute, lost it, and uttered the remark adequate to the occasion. The girl broke into a merry peal of laughter, and he looked round with a guilty start.

"Hello!" he cried. "Oh! it's you, is it?"

She laughed again. "I believe you are disappointed," she replied. "Come out and say 'good morning.'"

"Right-oh," he returned. "But, I say—wait half a jiffy. I only want two to make the dozen."

"Not another minute," she retorted, with mock severity. "I saw that fly you were using. Poacher! If you don't come at once, I'll—I'll tell Farmer Pountney!"

Wyer's jolly, sun-tanned face assumed a look of comical dismay. He reeled in his line hastily and waded ashore. "You rogue!" he threatened. "I'll punish you for that."

And the future Countess of Janesford accepted her punishment with exemplary meekness.

AFTERWORD

IT cannot be denied that this story has introduced many characters and presented many scenes which, to say the least of it, are of a somewhat unpleasant nature; and it would be, perhaps, more or less gratifying to all concerned were the same story concluded with the little comedy of two lovers at the end of the previous chapter.

But in this world there are many who, like M. Faverol, are insatiable in their craving to gain every jot of information possible.

They will exclaim: "Yes, that is all very well, but what we want to know is, What became of André Gaspard? Did one of those mysterious mental attacks which suddenly changed him from an insane vengeance-seeker into a human being receptive of the softer passions and kindly feelings towards his fellow-creatures, and, *vice versa*, did those curious changes in his personality recur? Did he return to bring anxiety and misery to Ninette? Or did M. Lavigne raise M. Faverol's

jealousy to fever-pitch by capturing the famous leader of the 'Invisibles' and re-conveying him whence he had escaped?"

The answer to both questions is, No.

So far as Lavigne was concerned, André Gaspard might, indeed, have been "invisible."

But, nearly twenty years after the events narrated in this story occurred, and before the sound of the motor-horn came to disturb the peace and quiet of the Janesford countryside and jangle the sensitive nerves of the skittish Primrose's equally skittish equine successors, Trevor Wyer (long since become Lord Janesford), in scanning the contents of a Sydney-side newspaper sent to him by his eldest son, who at the time was learning self-reliance and the benefit of healthy labour in Australia, came upon the following paragraph:

"A well known 'sun-downer' (*i.e.*, tramp) has died recently in the hospital at Woolabarra. For many years past he has been 'on the wallaby' up and down the back country beyond the Bennet Mountains. His antecedents have always been a source of much speculation; for there was no doubt that the old 'sun-downer' was a very highly educated man and had seen better times.

"Although of an extremely powerful build, he

exhibited a peaceful, and even gentle, disposition, amounting almost to 'simpleness,' which suggests a harmless brain affection. But his brethren of the 'swag' left him severely alone; for it is said that on several occasions, being chaffed beyond endurance in the shearing-sheds, he had first felled the offender with a well-directed blow, and then proceeded to extract a tooth—preferably a sound one—from the fallen man's jaws with no other aid than his finger and thumb.

"A glance at the thumb muscles of the 'sun-downer' made this story less incredible than it might appear. The name of this 'sun-downer' never transpired; but his feat had procured for him the nickname of 'the dentist.'

"He was also called 'Old Canary-bird,' for, to the last, he possessed a remarkably fine voice; and on the sheep runs where he was employed in shearing, many squatters made the unusual habit of inviting 'Old Canary-bird' into the house in the evening for the purpose of entertaining their ladies or any guests who might be visiting the station."

"By Jove!" Lord Janesford exclaimed, handing the newspaper to his wife. "Read that, Celeste, and say who it reminds you of! H'm,

I wonder," he went on, musingly. "And I never got that story out of him!"

Possibly those who are "budding Faverols" will not wonder, but will draw their own conclusions!

THE END.

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